

## Stranger With This Face (Complete)

by Nick

Category: Babylon 5  
Language: English  
Status: Completed  
Published: 1999-06-20 08:00:00  
Updated: 1999-06-20 08:00:00  
Packaged: 2016-04-27 09:23:35  
Rating: T  
Chapters: 1  
Words: 33,930  
Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)  
Summary: Sequel to 'Redemption'. Now complete. All done, bye-bye.

## Stranger With This Face (Complete)

> <meta name="Generator"> REDEMPTION 2: STRANGER WITH THIS FACE  
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STRANGER WITH THIS FACE (Sequel to 'Redemption')

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By Nick ([freakmagnet@bigfoot.com](mailto:freakmagnet@bigfoot.com))

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PART ONE

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Dr. Hobbs' Personal Diary:

We arrived two days ago to an absolute nightmare. The Lumati Homeworld, ravaged as it is by the virus sweeping through its population, has been brought to a virtual standstill.

We still don't know where the disease came from and frankly it's not our job to find out, we're simply here to tend the sick. Dr Franklin and his team at the Xenobiology Research Unit at Earthdome are doing all the detective work and trying to find a vaccine or a cure. Myself and the rest of the trauma team, gleaned from Babylon 5 in my case but also from the Narn Regime, the Drazi Homeworld, the Minbari Federation and Brakir are on the front line, mopping brows, emptying bedpans and praying for miracles that never come.

So far only the Lumati themselves have been affected by the virus but my people are in danger of exhaustion. Fortunately we've managed to

secure some more med. staff from the Alliance and they should arrive at around the same time as Franklin.

The crisis has not been made any easier to cope with by the Lumati who have no medical personnel and virtually no facilities of their own. The Lumati believe that trying to stop an illness or heal an injury is to go against nature and weaken the gene pool as a whole, so they leave their sick to grow worse and to die. Of course, the fact that the disease has only recently begun to attack the ruling half of the species, striking before at the subordinate slave class of less 'superior' Lumati, has nothing to do with their sudden willingness to accept and even ask for help. The threat of annihilation often has a strange effect on people's beliefs and principles.

Still, people volunteered their help even before being asked: the first offworlders to choose to help the Lumati were a group of cargo workers passing through. A small number of them took pity on the slaves afflicted by the terrible disease. One of those workers I realised today, I recognised from a few years ago on Babylon 5. He's a minbari- I remember he was Ambassador Delenn's aide. I'd not seen him for a good few years, not since shortly after Delenn's marriage to President Sheridan. He didn't exactly look pleased to see me but was typically polite and cordial. I get the feeling he wasn't expecting to see anyone from the station. I'm guessing he's on the run from someone or something but I didn't have time to ask.

Maybe I'll ask Franklin when he gets here. He's not usually the best for gossip but if he's in contact with Mr Garibaldi- who \*always\* knows what's going on, then I'm sure he'll know something. A little gossip and the possibility of some scandal would be a welcome distraction.

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This room smelt of death. Strange, who would have thought that death would have a smell. But it did: a sickly, cloying stench that clung to everything it came into contact with- walls, floor, sheets, towels, hair, skin. After each shift he would scrub furiously at his skin with the cleansing compound to rid himself of the scent but it was always there. He had even taken to showering in water as some of the other races did but that was no help either- the smell stayed with everything it came into contact with, just as the plague that had precipitated it did.

Calmly, he rose to his feet, disengaging his hand from the clenched fist of the now dead man who lay before him. Paying little heed to joints and muscles that protested about being cramped for too long, he closed his eyes and muttered a short prayer he had heard the Lumati offer their dead countless times before. Having tugged a sheet over the dead Lumati's face he moved off, through the ward that had become little more than a 'dying room' and out into the relative cool of the adjoining corridor. "That's the third today." The Brakiri's voice was soft, as empty and devoid of emotion as Lennier's had become. Startled at the sudden sound, Lennier looked up into the kindly face and nodded once in affirmation,

"Yes. But there may be more before today is over."

"I know. Lennier, you should rest. There's little else you can do today. I'll take over the deathwatchâ€|"

"I feel I shouldâ€|"

"Don't worry," the Brakiri placed one hand on his arm, "I won't let \*anyone\* die alone."

Realising that arguing would be futile, Lennier relented, "Very well. How long until the new supplies arrive?"

"They're expected the day after tomorrow. That Dr Hobbs told me we'll have equipment and some medical technicians as well as the team being sent from Earth to investigate the virus."

"That will be most welcome. Goodnight Grare." Lennier folded his hands and bowed deeply to the smaller man before turning and walking away, his soft steps echoing through the empty corridors of the temple that served as a hospice.

"He's exhausted." Dr Hobbs stepped out of an adjoining room, her own fatigue evidenced by the dark circles under her eyes and the pallor of her complexion which was thin and hollowed in the dim light.

"He's no worse than the rest of us. Minbari are strong, they cope more easily with stressful situations than some other races." Grare replied, watching after the once muscular man now slight from poor food and little physical exercise. "They bend but rarely break."

"How long have you known Lennier?" In the gloom Grare could make out curious eyes in the now frowning face and he reminded himself not to give into idle gossip with someone he knew only in passing. And instead he decided to give as brief an account of his meeting Lennier as possible.

"We were both cargo hands aboard a Narn shuttle. We've been bunkmates for over a yearâ€|He doesn't say much. Some of the others say that he was exiled from the Anla'shok after an argument with Ambassador Delenn and that he's been drifting ever sinceâ€|"

"Is that true?"

"I've no idea. And no interest. Most of us cargo hands are drifters searching for something new, often running from something old- it's the way of things out here and we do not ask questions we would not ourselves feel comfortable answering. I do not judge on my comrades past mistakes, but on what I see and know, now. And what I see and know now is a man who rarely eats or rests but spends every moment caring for others. Whatever he may have done in the past, he is working hard to atone for it."

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The darkened streets were deserted and eerily silent as the temple when Lennier stepped out of the infirmary. The onset of the epidemic had led people to barricade themselves into their homes to avoid contracting the virus but since many were already infected, this had

only increased its spread throughout each household. Now, behind each door Lennier passed, the dead and dying were left unseen and uncounted, only a few making it as far as the temple.

The off-worlders' hostel was a tall, imposing building, formed from black glass into what Lennier had heard humans refer to as a 'skyscraper' no different from any of the other buildings in the city. Lumati dwellings were tall towers comprised of one room upon another. His own room was on the fourteenth floor and the lifts hadn't worked since the technician who cared for the hostel became sick ten days ago.

The stairs were narrow, steep and winding, formed from the same slippery black glass that made up the rest of the tower and with every step he took Lennier fully expected to slip and stumble to his death. When he eventually arrived at his abode, there was only minimal power and he fumbled about in the near darkness to reach the narrow bed at one end of the room. Mentally congratulating himself for having had the foresight to memorise the journey from door to bed, avoiding the low, sharp edged furniture that, moulded out of the floor and walls, proved to be precarious obstacles, he crawled onto the hard little bed and stared up into the blackness above. Without bothering to meditate or carry out any other traditional minbari sleep rituals, as he once would have, he let heavy eyelids fall shut and entered a fitful slumber filled with images of death and despair on this lonely and doomed planet.

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#### Marianne Charlton's Personal Diary:

I can't \*believe\* I got this assignment. I am \*so\* excited I can barely sit still. When Dr Franklin offered to sponsor me through further medical training so that I could become a physician's assistant instead of just a medical technicianâ€¦ I mean, I was perfectly content working on Mars in the hospital, but thisâ€¦ I thought things couldn't possibly get any better- now they haveâ€¦

Going to the Lumati homeworld as part of the field team is just going to be soâ€¦ I mean, I've never even left Mars, even for holidays, I've never even been to Earth and have met so few other races, just a few Narn and Centauriâ€¦

I've heard the reports, I know that things are pretty terrible out there. Dr Hobbs stellarcommed me the other day to check that I was sure I wanted to do itâ€¦ Unlike the rest of the PA's that are going with me I'm not going to be part of the investigation team with Dr Franklin, I'll be working as part of the frontline health team in the hospice.

I'm trying to imagine the kind of stress and suffering the Lumati people are facing but it's hard, I mean, I grew up here, on Mars where things may sometimes have been difficult but at least we've always had healthcare and whatnotâ€¦ Still, all I can do is my best that's what my dad used to say, and he was right.

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With the reassuring coolness of the black glass wall against his back, Lennier let his heart pound in his chest as he tried to calm his breathing. He felt faint with shock and allowed his legs to buckle beneath him, sending his body sliding down the smooth wall until he was squatting, whereupon he pushed his legs out in front of him so that he slumped onto the equally cool, black and glass floor.

His dizziness fading, Lennier allowed the concerned voice of the Brakiri man to seep into his consciousness. Slowly the man's face slid into focus and Lennier peered up at him through dazed and bleary eyes.

"You alright, Lennier? Can you hear me?" Grare moved to squat down beside his friend, letting his head fall back against the wall with an exhausted sigh. "I wondered how long it would be before one of us contracted the sickness. In spite of all the tireless work you do for us here, I did not expect *you* to be the first."

"It is *not* the sickness." Lennier shut his eyes and rested his own head against the wall, relishing its coolness against the bare bone of his crest. "I merely had a surprise." His voice sounded amazingly matter of fact, given what he had just experienced.

"Oh? Thank the spirits!" Grare smiled in relief, his manner relaxing against the unyielding wall they leant against. "What kind of *surprise* Lennier? What kind of surprise would turn your skin grey and widen your eyes like a mad thing? What kind of *surprise* would make your heart race like it does now and your breathing accelerate so? What kind of *surprise* could make you stop in your tracks and fight against collapse so that you could stagger away to hide here?" The pains and stresses of life on this sick planet had dulled even the typically acute senses of the Brakiri but in a brief flash, they returned and Grare scrutinised his friend with clear, nervous suspicion.

"It is nothing Grare," Lennier meant for his tone to be reassuringly dismissive but one glance into the tiny eyes that watched him so intently told him that the Brakiri would take more convincing. "I merely mistook someone for an individual I once knew. Since I know that person to be dead, the experience was unsettling." His hands composed in his lap, the minbari spoke with a finality that Grare had seen before. Grare knew that his friend considered the matter to be at a close and that further prying could accomplish nothing.

"Very well. I'll fetch you some water." Struggling to his feet, Grare reached a water fountain and filled a paper cup with liquid. "It's been a particularly difficult day, losing so many people—especially that child—he looked to be so much better."

"I know..." Lennier patted the hand that offered a cup to him reassuringly and took one, small, obedient sip before discarding the cup beside him.

"The new intake of med. technicians and physician's assistants is going to prove a godsend though. In spite of today's tragedies I think that we can finally allow ourselves to be more optimistic than

beforeâ€¦ At least Dr Hobbs seems to think soâ€¦."

"Indeed." Lennier was having difficulty keeping his attention on the conversation Grare was forcing him to have when his mind seemed intent on torturing him with images from the past. Perhaps he had been wrongâ€¦ It was true that she occupied a vast portion of his thoughts, after all, in recent months she was one of only a few fond memories he hadâ€¦ The woman he'd seen probably bore only a passing resemblance to Deborah, he told himself, but still he wasn't convincedâ€¦ And if it *was* herâ€¦ He couldn't bear to think of the consequences of his allowing her to see himâ€¦

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## PART TWO

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The makeshift ward was dingy with a closeness that got to the new med. team the moment they entered, sterile surgical gowns flapping like paper and expressions still fresh from a shuttle journey passed with hopeful banter and dreams of 'making a difference'. Grare noted to himself how young they all looked compared to the more seasoned volunteers who emptied bedpans, syringes and beds with characteristically lifeless eyes. He himself vaguely remembered wanting to 'make a difference' to these people. That was only six short months ago and now the Lumati were reduced to the nameless, faceless casualties of an enemy that showed no remorse. It had become a matter of mental and emotional survival to distance themselves from the victims they treated. None of them could face losing yet another friend, drinking partner, acquaintance or person he or she said good morning to everyday but did not know the name ofâ€¦ They were the worst, he supposed, the people he'd not had time to know, people he would have scant memories of and who would thus not live on in his mind, those who would be wholly forgotten in a matter of weeks.

Lennier was seated by a Lumati male, one long fingered and emaciated hand clutching at his small minbari one, almost clawing at him in the vain hope that holding on to one so alive would somehow stave off the inevitable. The male was grey skinned and withered to resemble one twice his age. Desperate eyes fought to see from ulcerated and hollowed sockets. The minbari man paid little heed to the pus weeping from the sores that littered his companion's skin, moving only to mop the perspiration from the dying man's brow. He'd been sitting there a good twelve hours now and would not, Grare knew, move from his station until the Lumati's eyes fell shut one last time with an exhausted and relieved exhalation of breath.

Grare did not know the man's name and nor, he suspected, did Lennier but that hardly mattered for the man believed Lennier to be the son he'd not seen in five years following a trivial argument and now beseeched him for forgiveness. Lennier did nothing to dissuade the man and merely accepted the apologies on behalf of a son who was no doubt dead from the same plague, no doubt murmuring the same pathetic entreaties from a med. tech he mistook for his father. Lennier

offered a silent prayer that the man's son had not died alone but in truth the words of the prayer were just that: words. He'd said so many prayers in recent months that he barely heard the words let alone the thoughts behind them.

Clipboards in hand, the gaggle of newly arrived med. techs and physician's assistants hovered for a moment at the doorway, innocent eyes assessing the scene before them.

One woman, the badge clipped to her lapel marking her out as a PA stepped forward a little more decisively than did the others. Her mid length blonde hair was pulled back into a tight French plait and her spectacles hung suspended from a cord that stirred with every breath she took. Grey eyes, tinged a little blue by the reflected colour of her scrubs, surveyed the room.

Row upon row of narrow cots filled the space, each one containing the pitiful near- dead figure of a Lumati in the last stages of the virus, grey, ulcerated skin stretched taught over emaciated frames, eyes wild with thankful madness. The sheets that clothed them were soaked and stained yellow with sweat and urine, the acrid smell of which filled the room.

Allowing her gaze to reach upwards she noted that the room had no ventilation and wondered to herself whether the Lumati would strongly object to having holes drilled in the ceiling of their temple to allow installation of some form of air conditioning.

There only appeared to be a few volunteers here today, was this all there was? Spying a human woman bent over a patient, her hair falling in front of her face as she hastily sought out a pulse, Marianne approached.

"Dr Hobbs?" The older woman looked up, removing her gloves and signalling to two techs to remove the corpse from the cot to make room for someone else, and shook her head. "I'm Marianne Charlton, one of the team Dr Franklin sent." Registering the young woman's words somewhere in her mind, Dr Hobbs nodded vaguely and briefly shook the proffered hand.

"Where is Stephen?"

"Dr Franklin has started investigating already. He thought he had a lead on Patient Zero"

"Ahâ€|" Fetching a new set of gloves from the dwindling collection in the pocket of her scrubs, Hobbs nodded again. "I take it you've brought suppliesâ€|" And you can organise yourselves. I'd like my volunteers to get some rest as soon as possible- we've all been pulling double and even triple shiftsâ€|"

"Of course. If we could hold a short changeover meeting with your staff, we can get started right away."

The meeting was held in one corner of the room which, curtained off with plastic sheeting, served as an impromptu staffroom. There weren't enough plastic cups to go around so friends shared cups of coffee between themselves. Scanning the room Marianne noted that there were two Narns, a Brakiri, a Drazi and a Minbari working as volunteers in the hospice in addition to a smattering of humans. All

looked tired and drawn, the Brakiri a little wired, obviously suffering the after-effects of too much caffeine. The two Narns were thinner than was the norm, their structured and battle-oriented clothing hanging stiffly from tired shoulders, but they stood straight and proud- typical of the Narns, she thought. The Drazi looked a little less angered than most Drazi normally did; she sagged bonelessly against a desk, her paper cup held in one hand that hung limply at her side.

Beside the Brakiri stood a neat and composed looking Minbari, his head lowered and his hands folded. She'd never met a Minbari before but strangely something about his air seemed familiar. However, dÃ©jÃ  vu was something she had long ago become accustomed to experiencing and mentally she reminded herself of what her medical textbooks had to say on the matter: That it was simply the mental misplacing of information wherein new data is coded accidentally as old.

The Minbari did not glance up from his folded hands until the introductions were made whereupon he appeared to be suddenly hit by a dizzy spell of some sort and hastily left the room. Maybe he was anxious of speaking in public, she reasoned, or maybe he'd suddenly been hit by the fatigue that already affected his comrades. Secretly she hoped that it was not a first sign of the virus which had, until now confined itself only to the Lumati. If the disease mutated to jump species then the results could be catastrophic for the rest of the Alliance and not just the Lumati.

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Lennier had no idea how he had made it out of the temple and back to his rooms. Panic still flexed her claws at his gut and sucked the air out of his lungs, squeezing with no discernible rhythm at his heart until he thought that his internal organs would shut themselves down in protest.

Her name is Marianne now. She's not Deborah anymore. The tortured soul he'd comforted into a death of sorts no longer lived inside the grey eyes that glanced appraisingly around the staffroom. Deborah had been a thin and mousy creature with dirty blonde hair and a pallid complexion; her posture stooped and closed, her expression equally so. Marianne was, by comparison, a bright and vivacious young woman, well covered and sturdily built. Her expression alive and her actions animated, she captured the attention of her audience with her ideas, comments and suggestions and managed to flirt with all around her just enough to take the desperate edge off their situation. Marianne was everything that Deborah could have been had real life not gotten in the way. And what was more, she \*deserved\* to be allowed to remain so. Lennier knew that he had to ensure that she stayed that way even if it meant leaving the Lumati homeworld right away.

Which was why he now found himself hastily throwing his pitifully few belongings into a bag.

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"Stephen!" Dr Hobbs couldn't keep the excitement out of her voice as Franklin's familiar shape stepped off the transport, an overnight bag slung over one shoulder, creasing his rain-Mac impossibly.



"Long time no seeâ€|" he held out one hand for her to shake and when she took it, used it instead to pull her into an impulsive bear hug.

"It's about time you got here.." she whispered against his shoulder, fighting back relieved tears that now threatened to ruin her hard-come-by calmness. The sight of a familiar face, a human face, fresh and alive with no sign of the sickness or stress was having a strange effect on her and shamefully brushing the tears from her face with the back of her hand, she tried to shrug off her sudden show of emotion. Refusing to accept her mumbled apologies, he pulled her back into yet another bruising hug which lasted until he was sure she'd calmed down and gave the other members of his team completely the wrong ideaâ€|

"Well," he murmured, glancing around at the medical practitioners around them who all busied themselves with examining the floor, the shuttle fuselage, their luggage tickets, "At least that should stop my secretary trying to fix me up with her daughterâ€| Come on you better fill me in on what's been happening since we last spokeâ€|"

"Most of your team already arrived yesterday, thank god. They're a good bunch and believe me; we needed new staff desperately. That PA you sent impressed me particularlyâ€|"

"Marianne Charlton? I thought she might. She was wasted as a med. tech and I figured she'd be good out here- she's a lot more compassionate than most PA's or doctors. Her family were killed in a shuttle crash about two years back and she spent a \*helluva\* long time in hospitalâ€|"

"Mm, she's good at thinking on her feet but at the same time she's managed to hold onto her bedside manner- that's vital in the situation we're in."

The two friends wandered out of the hangar and toward the makeshift hospital, arm in arm, the rest of the med. workers trailing along behind.

"We didn't have much luck tracking down that leadâ€|The virus infesting the colony on that moon near Centauri Prime wasn't related to this oneâ€|"

"Which is something to be grateful forâ€| I don't think we could cope with another outbreak of this disease elsewhere as well as hereâ€|"

"I know but it means we're no closer to finding out where the disease came from or how to treat it. That the disease could spread to anyone else is unthinkable I know but we know so little about Lumati physiologyâ€| at least with the Centauri we might be able to treat the illness more readily or at least follow the disease \*closely\* enough to build a model of it's progressâ€| With the Lumati we're really fighting in the darkâ€| I guess we just wanted to bring you people \*some\* good newsâ€|"

"I know. And you're doing everything you can. This thing hasn't got the better of us yetâ€|"

Their conversation was interrupted by Grare's urgent sounding voice on Hobbs' commlink; "This is Dr Hobbs. What is it Grare?"

"Dr Hobbs, you should hurryâ€¦ Palorr just collapsedâ€¦"

"Damnâ€¦ I'm on my way." Grabbing Franklin's arm she pulled him toward the temple which stretched up above them, foreboding in the dusk.

"Who's Palorr?"

"One of the volunteers who got here before I did- she's Drazi." Hobbs noticed that the other med. staff were exchanging grim looks: this wasn't what they'd come here for- the disease was only supposed to affect Lumati, it wasn't supposed to jump species.

"Let's not jump to conclusions yet. A lot of the original volunteers are still over stretching themselves and are suffering from exhaustion- it may be just that."

"She's right. And even if it is the virus, we still have a job to do."

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"Well, that confirms itâ€¦" Franklin scowled at the test tube his colleague held in rubber-gloved fingers. The tube was half-filled with a green-tinged liquid and Hobbs was shaking the thing gingerly between thumb and forefinger as if shaking it one more time would somehow change the result. Marianne had taken the sample from the middle aged Drazi, perched on the edge of the patient's cot, her best 'it's nothing to worry about' smile thinly stretched over her face. Now the same PA gave her patient's hand a firm squeeze.

"It'll be okayâ€¦ We know a lot more about how your body works than we do about the Lumati- we'll have a cure in no time. And Drazi immune systems are one of the strongest we know, you might fight this off all by yourselfâ€¦"

Looking on with the other volunteers though, Grare knew otherwise. He'd seen just how bad this virus could get and he knew that while it would be several days before the Drazi died, that she would soon wish her death advanced soonerâ€¦

And where was Lennier? The testing of all volunteers was vital now and already people were lining up, their left sleeves rolled up in readiness for the bloodtest.

"We'll have to extend the quarantine to include non-Lumati as well." Franklin muttered to Hobbs as she filled a vial with a sample of his blood

"I know." Nodding grimly she handed him a fresh syringe as she deposited his in the storage rack to one side "Now you do me."

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Lennier's rushed packing was largely finished now and without a backward glance, he left his rooms and all but flew down the steps.

There was a transport leaving the planet in fifteen minutes- he didn't have long but he knew he could make it- he had to.

The queue to check in wasn't long but seemed to be taking ages and Lennier wondered to himself what the hold up could be. Finally the barrier lifted and he and the scarce other passengers were allowed leave to embark.

The cabin was cramped, claustrophobic and Lennier found himself practising the breathing exercises he'd been taught in the rangers to calm the rising panic that threatened to overwhelm him, drive him out of his seat and off of this shuttle, make him run back to the temple just so that he could see her one more time- convince himself that it wasn't really her, that it was safe for him to stay and be near herâ€|

The doors were closing and the engines starting up. The pilot's voice was tinny over the slightly basic tanoy system, announcing take-off in approximately 30 seconds. Screwing his eyes up tight, Lennier tried to block out Deborah's image from where it had plastered itself over the insides of his eyelids. This was the \*only\* wayâ€| Not long nowâ€|

The engines stopped. What was happening?

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"That was the shuttle port," Stanton, a young, slightly green-looking med. tech looked up from the computer monitor, "Quarantine's in place. Only one shuttle got through before the message reached them. There were only a few passengers onboard and they stop at the next moon for refuelling before heading for Earth."

"Good. Have a biohazard team meet them there just in case. Tell 'em not to be too heavy handedâ€|"

"Understood"

"Did anyone manage to get hold of the passenger manifest?" Franklin half yelled into the throng of people to-ing and fro-ing through the makeshift staffroom/ office/ incident room.

"Yep." Hobbs was flicking through a sheaf of papers, a biro tapping rhythmically on her lower lip.

"Any Drazi? They're our main concern since we know them to be receptive to the virus."

Impatiently pinning a few unruly locks of hair from her face by twisting her hair into a knot and securing it with the pen, Hobbs scanned the list quickly. "Umâ€|two humans, a minbariâ€|no. No Drazi." She looked up in some amount of relief and the others mirrored her expression.

Only Grare looked startled. Minbari? He knew as well as anyone that there had only been one minbari on the Lumati homeworld- Lennier.

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### PART THREE

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The hangar was suddenly quiet again, the strong breeze caused by the shuttle's take-off slowly dying down. In the aftermath of the take-off the hangar was deserted and Lennier picked up his bag and wandered aimlessly to the exit. He didn't know what madness had made him get off the shuttle to stop here and watch it disappear over the horizon but now he knew he was stranded here. And as if to remind him of this fact, the computer monitors that littered the bay showed a continuously looped message telling of the quarantine which was now in effect.

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This bed was awful! Groaning to herself, Marianne stretched out on it and closed her eyes. The mattress was lumpy and a little damp, probably hadn't been aired in a while, she reasoned! And was that a spring poking her in the back!?.? Oh what the hell, she was that tired, it would take more than a few rusty old springs to keep her awake tonight. Dr Franklin hadn't been exaggerating when he'd described the 'Lumati situation' as a disaster. There had been countless deaths and although Marianne had known this assignment was going to be a harrowing one, nothing could really have prepared her for the horrors she'd seen today!

Franklin had said something to her once about looking into the eyes of a dying man and seeing that man's god reflected back. Marianne had seen \*a lot\* of reflected gods that day and now, sinking into the lumpy mattress and covered by a scratchy blanket that smelt distinctly mouldy, she wished, not for the first time that she had memories of happier times to fall back on!

A few feet away, her rooms mate; Kathy was starting to snore- obviously not having the same difficulties! Earlier, Kathy had told her about her home, back on Earth, of parents who fought like cats and dogs and four brothers who teased her and pulled her hair as she was growing up. And in spite of the scorn with which the young med. Tech had spoken of them, Marianne could tell that she missed them. Marianne didn't have that luxury! And today more than ever she wished she could remember her own family.

She knew all of the details of course: two parents, one younger brother, all killed in the shuttle crash that had left her with permanent amnesia! As far as Marianne was concerned, her life had begun when she'd woken up in a Mars hospital two years ago. According to the government records she'd been part way through her medical training when the crash had occurred which perhaps explained why she found it so easy to pick up medical terms and knowledge.

It was odd but having little memory of her previous life never really bothered her, and she was perfectly content to live in the present. And right now if 'the present' included the death and disease she saw today then so be it.

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"Lennier?" Grare winced against the light that suddenly bathed the rooms he shared with the Minbari. As a night-dwelling species, the Brakiri often found adjusting to sudden bright light rather difficult and the small man let his eyes adjust before speaking again. "Where have you been?" Receiving little in the way of an answer from the Minbari who simply stashed his duffel bag into his footlocker and removed his shoes in preparation for bed, Grare continued to talk, his voice becoming little more than a constant stream of babble. "They closed the shuttleport, you know- quarantine- one of the volunteers has the virus, we were all tested today-" That got his attention,

"Who?"

"Who what?"

"Who has the virus?" Lennier's voice was typically calm but his roommate still detected a little uncharacteristic urgency.

"The Drazi woman, Palorr"

"In Valen's nameâ€¦" Lennier offered the words as a soft prayer and promised himself that he would visit with the woman tomorrow. She had worked almost tirelessly since she had arrived here at the same time as he hadâ€¦ She did *\*not\** deserve thisâ€¦

"What happened to you Lennier? I was worriedâ€¦the others noticed your absenceâ€¦"

"There was no need to worry, Grare." Lennier's voice remained soft but his countenance now lost its previous skittishness and impatience. Grare noted to himself that the walls were once again rebuilt and that the man before him was indeed the Lennier he was used to.

"One of us fell sickâ€¦ of course there was something to worry aboutâ€¦ Particularly after yourâ€¦'turn'. I was fearful that you also had the diseaseâ€¦ nothing has occurred to reassure me otherwiseâ€¦"

Lennier closed his eyes briefly in a vain attempt at shutting out the faintly whining voice; "If it is any consolation to you I plan to undergo the blood test tomorrow." He said, lying back in the narrow bed.

"Well, I'm very glad to hear itâ€¦" Grare followed suit, curling up on his own narrow bunk. "Lennier, whatever troubled you earlierâ€¦ I take it by your reappearance that whatever it was, it is settled nowâ€¦resolved evenâ€¦?"

"Yes Grare. The matter is resolved." Lennier lied, startling himself by doing so with such ease. As resolved as it can be he added silently and admitted to himself that sleep wasn't going to come easily to him.

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The temple was in a kind of peaceful chaos when Lennier and Grare arrived. The new staff appeared to have settled in well, their tones and mannerisms betraying little of their urgency as they moved from

bed to bed, armed with syringes, performing blood tests on all of the patients. Grare pulled aside one of the orderlies to ask what was going on.

"The head PA ordered testing of everyone here to ensure all the patients do actually have the virus. We've had such primitive testing equipment up until now that we could only assume that everyone who grew sick had the virus. She's also getting us to segregate everyone according to how advanced the disease is in each of them. Go through there and get cleaned up- there're clean overalls in there." The Narn then reached out to touch Lennier's arm, half-whispering as he did so "Are you alright Lennier? We were worried about you when you ran out of here yesterdayâ€¦ You still need to be tested for the virus. Miss Charlton- that's the head PA, she's in charge of staff and volunteer testing as well. She's through there. She'll give you a blood test. Good luck my friend."

"Wait, G'Nare, how is Palorr? I heard she developed the virusâ€¦" Lennier kept a firm grip on the male's wrist, then he noticed the Narn's downcast eyes and felt his own heart sink.

"She has grown worse overnight. The disease has spread through her system faster than it does with the Lumati. She's already in the final stages. Get tested and then I'll take you to herâ€¦"

"Very wellâ€¦" Letting go of his friend, Lennier slowly walked over to the curtained off area G'Nare had earlier gestured to. As he rounded the makeshift barrier, he caught sight of a petite woman stooped over a microscope, glasses discarded on the desk beside her and hair held back with one delicate hand as the other scribbled notes onto a chart beside her. The medical scrubs she wore were obviously too big for her and the bottoms of the pants had been rolled up and stapled in place. Although her seated position obscured his view, he could tell that the tunic she wore reached down to her knees and the overcoat probably got under her feet when she walked- it's sleeves had been impatiently pushed up by hands too busy to waste time on taking more permanent measures.

In the stillness of the small space, he could hear her humming to herself as she chewed frantically on her lower lip.

"Hmâ€¦mmâ€¦Ah haâ€¦uhmâ€¦now I've got youâ€¦. Ohâ€¦maybe notâ€¦.uhmâ€¦"

"Miss Charlton?" Lennier had entirely forgotten about the Brakiri who stood beside him. "We met yesterdayâ€¦I'm Grareâ€¦" the slight man stepped forward and offered his hand which was instantly seized by the woman who hid her surprise behind a warm smile,

"Hi, call me Marianne- this is hardly the time for formalities. Besides Marianne is easier to shoutâ€¦Hello, who are you?" Lennier found himself being peered at by the woman who let go of Grare's hand to reach out to him.

"L-Lennierâ€¦My name is Lennier. I'm one of the volunteersâ€¦"

"Well you're not Lumati so that was my guess as wellâ€¦" she grinned and he felt suddenly foolish for stating the obvious. "Are you alright Lennier? You look a little pale- even for a minbariâ€¦here, have my seat." She got up, still gripping his hand with surprising

strength and used her extra leverage to manoeuvre him into her seat before he could protest.

"Lennier wasn't tested yesterday." Grare informed her; slightly smugly- he'd finally gotten his friend to the help he needed.

"Oh, I see.." Marianne's concern increased and she reached over both her desk and Lennier to pluck a pair of prophylactic gloves from a freshly opened box. "Well let's keep our fingers crossed eh?" wheeling a stool over to him she positioned herself side on to Lennier's now outstretched arm "It's probably just exhaustion- you volunteers have been working your socks off- I'm impressed, we all are. Things would have been a lot worse here if it weren't for what you all didâ€¦." Glancing up suddenly through heavy lashes she grinned, "Actually I've been wondering when I was going to get to meet the famous minbariâ€¦ You're quite the hero amongst the othersâ€¦ G'Nare tells me you work five times as hard as the restâ€¦ I think I was expecting some kind of automaton, not real flesh and bloodâ€¦ Dr Franklin wants to meet you tooâ€¦.There, all done." She held up the tiny vial of blood triumphantly before turning her stool and pushing off on one small foot to land at the other side of the room where a row of bottles balanced precariously on the computer monitor that stood there. "Nowâ€¦where's theâ€¦Ah ha. This won't take a second." She called over her shoulder as she fiddled about making a slide.

Moments later she returned, still perched on the stool, slide in hand, "This is a quicker way of diagnosing the virus- I can see how far it's progressed as wellâ€¦" Lennier saw that he was in the way and started to rise. A hand shot out to hold him where he was, "No don't get up. I've taken quite a lot of blood- you'll still be feeling woozy. I can work around youâ€¦" pushing his chair aside she manoeuvred herself side on to the microscope and slotted Lennier's sample in place. "Okay, lets seeâ€¦.Where are you, you littleâ€¦ Ah haâ€¦.Nup, no sign of em. You're clear, see for yourself." Straightening up she tugged on his sleeve, waking him from his reverie. Obediently he peered into the microscope

"Iâ€¦can't see anythingâ€¦"

"Exactly."

"In that case," this time Lennier made it his feet without being stopped. "I promised that I would visit Palorr." Marianne was nodding quickly but at the same time distractedly as she replaced Lennier's slide with the one she'd been examining when he had first entered.

"Okay, but come straight back after. I can see how exhausted you are and I want to assign you light duties only for a couple of daysâ€¦ You can help me here. Grare, would you mind finding Dr Hobbs- she mentioned needing more helpâ€¦"

"Of courseâ€¦"

"There're clean scrubs through thereâ€¦ You'll have to customise them a little- being mostly women we've run out of all the small sizesâ€¦"

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Closest to the makeshift staffroom where Marianne still stooped over her microscope were the beds containing the terminal cases. Row upon row of barely moving, barely breathing bodies, so diseased as to look already decayed.

Palorr's cot stood a little apart from the rest in a vain attempt to remind her that she was one of the staff, not \*just\* anyone. The staff and volunteers tried to treat her a little differently from the Lumati, not so much so as to upset the native patients, but just enough to give her hope- she was one of \*them\*â€|

Lennier saw no difference between his friend and the Lumati patients. Although the sores manifested themselves differently on her dark and slightly scaly Drazi skin, there was little doubt as to their cause. Her voice was dry and rasping as she struggled for each breath she took and used to give her speech.

"Lennierâ€|I wondered when you'd comeâ€|You don't have it do you?"

"No Palorr. So far I am clear." He forced himself to take her proffered hand, hiding his nausea behind a wall of calm.

"Lennier, I knowâ€| I look pretty awfulâ€| I'm so glad that you're all rightâ€| You've worked so tirelesslyâ€|. I thought for certain you'd fall to itâ€|I can see that you've fallen to \*something\* thoughâ€|What's wrong Lennier?"

"It is nothingâ€|My concern is with you."

"Lennier, it requires less energy to listen than to speakâ€|I wish to conserve energy so I'm asking you to speak to meâ€|If you cannot do that for an old friendâ€| Lennier, I've become a burden to my colleaguesâ€| As one who has spent all her time here \*working\*, that is â€|unsatisfactory to meâ€| Let me give \*something\* back, Let me help \*you\*"

"Lennier," A short, rather squat human hovered beside him, "Marianne asked me to find youâ€| She needs help with one of the patientsâ€|"

"Of course." Lennier rose smoothly to his feet and bowed to Palorr, promising to return later

"Beâ€|sure you do Lennierâ€| I still want to know what is troubling youâ€|" Palorr let her head fall back against the pillow and as he turned to leave, Lennier heard her address the human as Stanton, asking him to keep an eye on her dear friend Lennier.

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Tucking his hands into the too-long scrubs he found in the store cupboard, Lennier found he was shaking. Not visibly but he could feel the unsteadiness of his hands and how precariously he stood upon his two feet. Marianne had shown no signs of recognising him, that was something, he supposed.

Standing before a stained and cracked mirror to straighten the ridiculously oversized tunic, he found himself remembering Deborah's



fearful words to him in her cell more than two years ago,

"â€|There is so much I \*mustn't\* rememberâ€| Promise me that if we meet again, you'll walk awayâ€|"

He'd already broken his promise to her. A part of him had \*known\* he should leave the Lumati homeworld but he couldn't do it. And now, here he stood, about to spend the next three days trapped in that tiny makeshift office with her; watching her, listening to her, comparing her to Deborahâ€| There were already recognisable similarities- seeing how she chewed on her lower lip when her mind was elsewhere, how she held people's gaze with odd, flickering glancesâ€| There were differences also. Marianne was obviously more confident; she was able to relax, even in the midst of the chaotic wardâ€| Just as he'd suspected, Marianne was everything Deborah would have given all that she had to be and Lennier found himself wanting to stay just a little longer, just to see how like and unlike Deborah this stranger truly was.

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PART FOUR

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"Lennier, how are we getting on?" Marianne was peering at the computer screen before her as she casually threw the question into the awkwardly silent room. The two of them had worked untiringly for over six hours in the tiny makeshift office, barely speaking to one another, although she could not work out why the atmosphere was so tense. She guessed that the minbari was shy but although she knew how urgent their work had become, she also couldn't concentrate in this rigid and stilted environment.

"I have completed the inventory of our supplies." His reply was rigid, formal and he straightened stiffly the moment she cleared her throat to ask the question, although he barely looked at her when he answered.

"Okayâ€|" time to try a different approach. "And are \*you\* alright? I'm sorry to have dragged you away from your friend, I know how worried you all are about her but I really \*did\* need help in hereâ€|"

"I understand. And I agree that the best way to help Palorr is to find a cure for this virus."

"That's right. Look, I know that the stuff I've had you doing today isn't quite in the same league as what you've been doing here in the past but it really \*did\* need seeing to. If it's any consolation, being stuck in front of a computer all day isn't why I started doing this job eitherâ€|"

"There is no need to apologiseâ€|"

"I'm glad. I didn't want you to resent meâ€| I mean, you volunteers worked so hard and did an excellent jobâ€| I feel awkward just coming in here changing things and shouting ordersâ€|"

"I do notâ€¦ 'resent' you."

"Okayâ€¦ well now we've got that cleared up, why don't we stop for a while. You said you were almost done and I'm getting tunnel visionâ€¦ Time for a coffee. Mugs are in the box to your left- the one marked 'emergency rations'â€¦"

Finding himself smiling lightly at the humour, Lennier did as he was bid and took the two cups over to where Marianne was swilling the coffee pot around in circles, eyeing it suspiciously. "I don't know when this was madeâ€¦ It's gonna be pretty rankâ€¦" she poured the thick, black liquid into one cup but was stopped before she had a chance to fill the other.

"I do not drink coffee."

"Oh, of course. Wise man- this stuff should carry a government health warningâ€¦" Marianne winced as she forced her throat to stop retching and to swallow the tar-like substance.

"It does!" Franklin's slightly booming voice startled Lennier as he filled his own cup with water. "Marianne, you drink \*far\* too much of that stuff- I said so in your last med. examinationâ€¦"

"Iâ€¦ ughâ€¦ knowâ€¦ Is there any milk anywhereâ€¦?"

"Lillian left some Soya stuff in the fridge next to those blood culturesâ€¦ There's some sweetener in that petri dish." Franklin replied, fetching a protein shake from his own personal stash. "So, Lennierâ€¦ Dr Hobbs mentioned that you were hereâ€¦ How are you?" Lennier felt himself shrinking under Franklin's gaze. The human was grinning over the top of his drink but there was no mistaking the slight edge in the man's voice. If Lennier's answer weren't convincing, the man would never let up. There was also the question of just how much Franklin knew about what happened between he and the Sheridansâ€¦

"Stephen," Marianne had fished the sweetener out of it's hiding place and took an experimental sip of her coffee- still awful but probably less likely to burn through the porcelain of her 'You don't have to be mad to work here, but it helps' mug. "I'm done with analysing those cultures and you were right about that antibiotic combinationâ€¦ I'm still worried about possible side effects thoughâ€¦ Here, take a look at thisâ€¦" She steered the doctor over to the microscope, winking at Lennier over her shoulder and motioning for him to leave, quickly.

As he discarded his cup and edged away, back onto the ward, Lennier could hear Franklin and Marianne discussing the samples she'd been working on and he heaved a sigh of relief. The ward was a little quieter than it had been earlier- the mass re-screening was over now and most patients simply lay flat out in their beds, unseeing eyes fixated on the high domed ceiling.

Palorr was dozing when he silently approached her bed and perched on the edge of a chair he found nearby. Minutes later her eyes forced themselves open and she blinked up at her surroundings before her gaze finally settled on her returning visitor.

"Why didn't you wake me Lennier?"

Lightly stroking her arm with a crooked finger, he shook his head, "You need your rest"

"Are you here to tell me what's wrong with you?" Lennier groaned inwardly, this woman was nothing if not persistent. "I noticed before, you looked a little 'awkward' when that other man mentioned the new PA. Does it have something to do with her? You ran out of here when she first arrived?" Palorr's body may have been weak and betraying her but there was obviously nothing wrong with her powers of observation or her mental faculties and Lennier found himself wondering if it would be easier to watch his friend slowly slip away if she were not sane. Maybe if she were so mad as to be no longer recognisable as Palorr, standing by helplessly as her once robust body withered and decayed before him would be less painful.

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"So, what was *that* all about?" Marianne snapped as soon as her Minbari assistant was out of the way.

"Sorry?" Franklin finished his drink in three short gulps before returning to the microscope.

"Scaring my assistant. I was just getting him to lighten up and you storm in here all guns blazing and put the fear of god into him!" Marianne had to fight to keep her voice from becoming shrill.

"What are you talking about? All I *did* was ask him where he'd been! It's been nearly *three years* for gods sake! Why are you so protective of him all of a sudden? There's no need- he used to be a ranger, from what I hear he's more than capable of looking after himself. Oh I get it!" Realisation lit up his face and he grinned "Didn't take *you* long!" Knowing *exactly* how to get a rise out of his protégé, he tweaked his grin to just this side of a leer and wagged his eyebrows at her.

"Stephen!" her voice rose warningly and she lifted her cup as if threatening to tip its contents at him.

"Marianne I didn't think you were *like* that! Here we are in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the dead and dying- under-funded and overworked and you've got a *crush* on a volunteer support worker! I must say, I'm *shocked*"

Marianne took a deep breath- this was getting her nowhere. Knowing Dr Franklin as she did she was pretty sure that if she didn't shut him up now then he was going to tease her to within an inch of her life.

"Give it a rest, Stephen. It's been a long day!" aiming for a passive offensive stance Marianne retreated back to her computer.

Realising that he'd gone a little too far, Stephen wheeled a seat over and seated himself beside her, tugging a packet of biscuits out of the emergency supplies box as he did so.

"Peace offering?" he waggled the open pack at her and relenting with a small smile, she took a biscuit. "I'm sorryâ€¦ I sometimes forget how sensitive you can beâ€¦"

"I \*don't\* have a 'crush' on him." She said firmly, nibbling the top off the two layered biscuit to scrape at the cream in the middle of it with tiny, razor sharp teeth. "I justâ€¦ he feels familiar. You know? I get that lot- things and people that seem familiar but I don't know whyâ€¦ There's so much I don't know about myself, don't \*remember\* I tend to grab hold of anything familiar and hang on for dear lifeâ€¦"

"Yeah, I knowâ€¦ But you've never tried to trace any possible family connectionsâ€¦. Go back to your old home and ask questionsâ€¦ I've never understood whyâ€¦"

"I don't knowâ€¦" she shrugged as she finished the middle of her biscuit and added it's bottom to the other half which had been abandoned temporarily on the desk beside her coffee. She reached for another. "I just can't bring myself toâ€¦ I suppose if I remember what happened then I'll start to remember my family and I'll have to deal with having lost people I care about- I'll have to mournâ€¦ This way it's like someone \*else\* was in that crash and lost her whole family and \*my\* life started when I woke up in that hospital bedâ€¦ I'm quite happy living in the here and now- most of the timeâ€¦"

"But you still have difficulty relating to peopleâ€¦ You're still encountering things for the first timeâ€¦ You don't even know if you've had a boyfriend beforeâ€¦"

"Exactlyâ€¦" a glum expression on her face, she flipped the top off her second biscuit to add to the pile growing on the desk and demolished the cream insert, adding the biscuit's base to the pile. "In these 'enlightened times' of ours, I sometimes feel like the universe's oldest virgin!"

Franklin guffawed, spitting biscuit crumbs over the small room and seeing his expression, Marianne giggled in spite of herself. "Well, anyway," she added, pulling her defence mechanisms back into place with a firm tug, "I really don't have \*time\* for anything more than friendshipâ€¦ And if I did, I think I'd probably start with someone of the same race as myself, that way I'd know for sure that all the right bits were fitting into all the right piecesâ€¦" Enjoying the snigger her remark forced out of her mentor, Marianne picked up the biscuit half on the top of her pile and dunked it into her coffee. Holding it there she counted to five before removing it and holding it up, moving it gently back and forwards, watching it bend and sway before popping it into her mouth moments before it disintegrated.

"I have \*never\* known \*anyone\* to eat a biscuit like thatâ€¦!" Franklin remarked, eyeing the young woman with obvious distaste "That is \*the\* most disgusting thing I've ever seen anyone doâ€¦"

"Oh be quiet, just because \*you\* have no vices!"

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"Lennier, one of the patients is asking for you.." Grare squatted down at his friend's side, placing one hand on the minbari's shoulder.

"It's Gnitha- I don't think he has longâ€¦" Excusing himself politely, Lennier left Palorr's side and moved the short distance to the terminal wing.

"Greetings Gnithaâ€¦" he spoke solemnly, trying his hardest to quell his shock at the Lumati's condition which had worsened over night to leave the man completely blind and paralysed with pain as his immune system won the fight against each of his internal organs. Gnitha could only gasp for breath and flail one hand about to seek out his own, which he offered almost instantly. He didn't have long left.

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It was dark when Lennier struggled to his feet, hands numbly pulling the sheet over the dead Lumati's face as he had done countless times before. Only a skeleton team remained in the hospice through the night and Gnitha's body would remain, for now where it was, undisturbed in his final rest.

"Lennier?" Marianne's pupils were wide in the dark of the office as he passed and her skin was almost luminous against the black backdrop. "I'm sorry about Gnithaâ€¦"

"It wasâ€¦ probably for the best." Avoiding her eyes, he concentrated on keeping his voice steady. "I have come to see each death here as a release, a blessing almost."

"I'm afraid I'm not so well-trained, nor do I want to be. I hope each death is as painful to me as the last. Have a drink with me Lennier?" Her whole manner beseeching him, he found himself agreeing and followed her into the office. "The others turned in a couple of hours ago. I wanted to stay and finish up. Also I didn't want you to be aloneâ€¦" Suddenly a little shy she busied herself with filling an antiquated kettle with water and searched out a tin of tea and not wanting to appear rude, Lennier agreed to stay, if only for a short while. "The database of patient reports is completed by the wayâ€¦ Now we know what stage of the disease each person is facing and we can more easily observe the virus' progression."

"Indeed." Lennier perched himself on a chair and took the cup she offered him. "When we arrived here, our first concern was for making people as comfortable as possible. I confess it did not occur to us to take inventories or commence investigationsâ€¦"

"Oh I \*know\*â€¦ And I don't want you to think that any of us is accusing you of harming the Lumati in any wayâ€¦ I'm sorry, what I said came out all wrongâ€¦" Turning to the supplies container she retrieved a tin of powdered milk, having used up all of Dr Hobbs' supply.

"Marianne," Lennier found himself getting to his feet and moving the tin from her fingers, standing in front of her. "You have not offended me. I understand that had these people received organised medical care straight away their chances would have been far greater. Although there is no dispute that myself and the other volunteers did our best it is now clear that our \*best\* was not good enough." Returning the milk tin to her hands, Lennier retreated back to his seat, leaving Marianne to stare momentarily at the object in her hands. As if waking up, she snapped her head around to face him

before forcing her concentration back to the matter in hand- that of spooning the strange powdered milk into the two cups.

"Lennier, I don't know many Minbari- well actually you're the only oneâ€¦ I wondered if thisâ€¦ 'altruism' is a personality trait common to all your peopleâ€¦"

"We believe serving others to be a great honour." He affirmed and Marianne stiffened for a moment, midway through spooning milk into her mug,

"I remember someone once telling me thatâ€¦ It's strange but you remind me of thingsâ€¦ I don't know if anyone told you this but I was involved in a shuttle accident about three years ago. My entire family was lost and I was left with almost total amnesia. All I was left with was my nameâ€¦ I suppose the amount of time I spent in hospital recovering meant that I was around members of the medical profession so much that they became pretty much my family and I decided to train as a medical technician. Dr Franklin thought I was wasted and sponsored me so that I could train as a physician's assistantâ€¦ I've picked things up so quickly that I think I must have undergone similar training before the accident. I've never tried to find out more about myself because I suppose I'm happy with this life and I don't want to spoil it by forcing myself to remember and mourn my familyâ€¦ But every now and then something happens thatâ€¦ I don't know, 'rings a bell' I suppose. Arriving here and meeting you did thatâ€¦"

Lennier could feel panic rising in his gut and he sank back further into his seat in a vain effort at putting some distance between himself and her recollections. This could, he realised, be even more difficult, even more dangerous than he'd first convinced himself. In light of this, he forced himself to stand and make his excuses before retreating; leaving her looking hurt and confused.

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The air outside was humid, sticky even and offered no reprieve from the closeness of the temple. Lennier took a few deep breaths as he stood on the steps and stared into the blackness of the city at night. Maybe it was just because of the plague, but while most cities on most worlds still held some life in them after dark, the Lumati capital became as silent as a desert at night, wrapping every building and lonely traveller in a thick veil of heat and smog.

Safe now from Marianne's reminiscences and fleeting glances, Lennier suddenly felt very alone- even more than usual. He was trapped here now, on a dying planet with little more than a broken promise for company. So what now? Escape was impossible now; the quarantine had put pay to that idea and one question now remained- what now?

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PART FIVE

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The air around her was stifling, thick with other people's sweat and this room was quite tiny. Vaguely aware of the shackles that slowed her movements, she shuffled in, led as she was by shadowy figures. There was someone waiting for her, his face obscured by the brightness of the room which grew more and more so as he lowered his head to her.

There, it was gone and Marianne found herself lying in her cot on the Lumati homeworld, sheets tangled around her ankles as she sprawled for a few moments, regaining her bearings.

"You're awake then." Kathy hovered by the door to their bathroom, toothbrush jammed into her mouth before returning to the antechamber to spit and rinse. "You were making quite a bit of noise thereâ€" wasn't sure if it was a good idea to wake you thoughâ€"

"What time is it?" groggily she rubbed one hand over her face and propped herself up on still- sleepy elbows.

"Late. There's about half an hour 'til your shift starts. Here get in the shower now, I'll be done here in a second." Kathy moved aside to let her room mate into the tiny bathroom. "Wassup? Weird dream?"

"Umâ€"yeahâ€" Marianne was trying very hard to get her hands to co-operate as she reached for a towel and moved to switch on the shower- real water, not a vibe shower like on the shuttles so she'd have to wait for her hair to dry as wellâ€". Tick, tick, tickâ€"

"Probably just stressâ€" Stanton says he dreamt he wandered into the hospice \*naked\* yesterday!"

"Ugh! Perish the thought!" Marianne managed to shout over the water and reassured that her acquaintance was 'okay really', Kathy finished dressing and left her to her musings.

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Lennier had already been on the ward for a full two hours when Marianne arrived furiously munching on a ration bar and tripping over her coat tails in her haste.

"Hi. Sorry, sorry, sorryâ€"rough nightâ€" she called out to anyone who showed an interest as she stumbled into the office, discarding her open satchel on the desk, where it promptly fell open, littering the work surface with data chips and files. "Buggerâ€" Ignoring the mess that was quickly sliding to the floor she hurried over to the coffee maker and lifted up the jug to peer into it- empty. "Bugger." There were no clean filter bagsâ€" "Bugger".

"Here, let me." Hobbs materialised over her shoulder for long enough to swipe the sodden paper out of her hands and manoeuvre the younger woman into a chair. "Medlab One trickâ€" she smirked holding up the used bag the contents of which she promptly tipped into the rubbish bag and replaced it in the filter before spooning copious amounts of coffee into it. "Voila!"

"Thank you." The PA managed to mumble as she sank into her chair and focussed her mind on the reassuring plip-plip sounds made by the

machine.

"What's wrong? I can get Stephen for you if you want.." Hobbs leant on the desk and eyed her new acquaintance with a concerned frown.

"It's nothingâ€¦ I just had some funny dreams, that's all." Marianne rubbed frantically at one tired and sore eye with the palm of her hand and refocused on the coffee maker.

"Define funny."

"Odd. Really, it's nothing to worry about. I should get out to the wardâ€¦" Spotting an easy escape route, Marianne was at the door before the other woman could object. But as she watched the PA hurry over to a trolley and stuff her pockets with prophylactic gloves, swiping a stethoscope from around the neck of one of her colleagues as she began her morning's duties, Hobbs made a mental note to tell Stephen that something was amiss with his protÃ©gÃ©.

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Watchful eyes darting from one end of the room to the other, Lennier stepped cautiously out onto the ward. Noting to himself that the object of his trepidation was at some distance, being as she was, at the other side of the hostel, he moved swiftly between the many beds until he reached one unattended by other volunteers. With a little less care than usual, he began the task of feeding and cleaning that bed's occupant. And so engrossed was he with the dual task of stripping bed-sheets and watching out for Marianne that he scarcely noticed Grare's approach until the Brakiri patted him on the shoulder. Without thinking, the minbari reached around to grab his assailant by the throat, lifting and then throwing the slighter being to a spot a few metres away where he sprawled, eyes and mouth wide with shock.

"Lennierâ€¦ I'm sorry, I-" Grare was stammering as he stared up at the minbari. Around them, the whole room had come to a virtual standstill: patients and staff pausing in their hurried activities to stare at the two men. Realising his mistake Lennier quickly knelt to pull his friend to his feet. "Someone said you were a ranger but I thought it just idle gossipâ€¦" Grare murmured, awe-struck. The minbari sighed as he noticed the gaping expressions that greeted him from all angles of the room. His attempts at remaining unnoticed had backfired and under the pretence of helping his friend to a quiet spot, he retreated down a corridor, out of sight of the prying eyes.

"Grare, I apologise. It was not my intention toâ€¦ Harm you."

"S'okay. I'm unharmed. You must be out of practice." Grare slumped into the seat that Lennier had found and guided him to, resting his weight against the wall behind him.

"Indeed." For his own part, Lennier recovered a stool for himself and dragged it to a space beside his friend. It seemed that some explanations would be necessary now and lowering himself slowly into the seat, he conveyed this to Grare.



"Lennier, you are an intensely private man and I respect that. As do the others here. Although I know there to be something on your mind, it was never my wish to pry. Howeverâ€¦ there is often some wisdom in sharing a problem. What is that human saying? A problem shared-"

"Is a problem halved." Lennier smiled weakly at the typically human phrase. "If you do not wish to pry then I am grateful for that. Grare, if I confide in you in the future then I trust that you would tell no one?"

"Of course not."

"Good. Because I am unsure as to the wisdom of sharing this with you for the time being but I should like to be able to call on you in the future. For now, can I say that there is someone here I should rather avoid."

"Miss Charlton." Noting the minbari's start, he found himself chuckling, "It was not difficult to guess. Very well. Although I cannot understand anybody's wish to avoid that \*particular\* individual- I'm told that she is considered quite attractive, by human standardsâ€¦ I shall do what I can to help you."

"Thank you."

"Well," the Brakiri was standing now and brushing imaginary dirt from the seat of his trousers, "If that is settled then \*my\* fright is certainly over- I trust yours is also. We should return to the ward, it will be medication time soon."

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As Lennier helped his friend to his feet and dragged him from the ward, Doctors Franklin and Hobbs both noted the strangeness of the minbari's actions. Raising one eyebrow, Stephen wandered into the staff room, Hobbs at his heels.

"Is it just me or is there something a little odd going on there?" Franklin came to rest against one of the desks, a frowning smirk taking over his features.

"Mm. Marianne's been a bit funny today as well. Said she was having funny dreams. Maybe it's just the stress of this placeâ€¦ We're all a little below par and frayed around the edges."

"You might be right there doctor." Franklin launched himself away from his perch and moved to rummage in the fridge. "When I first met herâ€¦ Ah damn, someone's taken my last protein drink- there're some sick people in this worldâ€¦"

"You're telling me. Only the sickest of the sick and the strangest of the strange would voluntarily drink something called 'carbo-tonic'!" Hobbs grinned, fishing into the bin beside her and retrieving the empty carton to read the label. "A tasty combination of Soya and tropical fruits- ugh."

"I don't believe it!" Franklin straightened and snatched the carton from his friend's hand. "I hoped I was mistaken about someone stealing this. We should run a DNA scan- find out who took itâ€¦"

Hobbs felt her eyes roll heavenward at such pettiness and struggled to switch the direction of the conversation, "You were saying something about Marianne." She prompted.

"Wha? Oh yeah. When I first met her- she was a patient at the centre and she had nightmares all the time. She could never recall them when she woke up and after a while they seemed to dissipate but I think in times of stress they come back."

"Oh."

"Man, I'm hungry. You wanna play hooky for a while and get a bite to eat?"

"Sure. But let's take the rest of that paperwork with us, okay?"

"Deal. You're about the worst workaholic I know. You need to ease up."

"This I get from \*you\*? Oh boyâ€|"

"Well, let's just say I learned the hard wayâ€|"

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That was interestingâ€| Marianne noted to herself, pausing to scribble notes on the sheet of paper beside her before returning to her microscope. It was late afternoon and the ward was quiet again after the midday routine of feeding and medicating patients. Stephen and Dr Hobbs were still outside, seated on the low glass wall that ran the circumference of the temple's exterior that now served as a kind of picnic area for medical staff who couldn't bring themselves to eat in the stuffy office and ward.

So now, Marianne was left alone to work-, which was just how she liked it. She could not remember a time when she had \*not\* preferred her own company, particularly during times of stress.

The virus captured in her microscope slide happily buzzed around it's enclosure, munching on whatever it came across as Marianne watched on avidly and gradually the outside world receded to nothing. Every chemical, every drug, and every combination: all useless.

Franklin was growing tetchy and turning to all avenues in the hope of beating it and now that meant asking his assistants for their input. Marianne figured that asking for help was not something such a proud man was unused to and so over time she had learned to give it freely and quietly. Today though, she would be of little use. The movements of the tiny creature that swam by so close to her eyes were too fascinating for her to drag herself away in order to find ways to stop it from moving as it did.

Marianne often found herself wondering about the afflictions she worked to cure. How was it possible for something such as this virus to move and act with such conviction and yet remain unconscious, non-sentient? The creature must be carrying out some equivalent of sleepwalking. No reason behind it. No reasoning \*with\* it. In order for \*it\* to live and progress, it's host must dieâ€| No way to

co-exist: no compromise.

The squeak of sneakered feet against a glass tiled floor signalled Franklin's return and Marianne glanced up from the microscope in greeting.

"How's it \*going\*?" Franklin seemed full of beans and he slapped two hands on her shoulders to peer into the microscope.

"Don't ask." Marianne leaned back to allow her mentor access to the machinery, turning her head to catch Dr Hobbs' eye. "I'm a physician's \*assistant\* with very good reason!"

"Nonsenseâ€|" Franklin adjusted the microscope as he continued to peer through the viewfinder

"Doctor, there's a very good reason why I work with \*people\* and not \*viruses\*. As far as I can see there are lots of pretty shapes that move about and remind me of a kid's kaleidoscope but that's all I canâ€| tellâ€| youâ€|" Marianne trailed off, confusion forcing her face into a frown.

"Marianne?" The attention of both doctors was now fixed on her, Franklin swivelling her chair around to face him, "You okay?"

"Yeah. I justâ€| I suppose you'd call it a flashback." Marianne rubbed frustratedly at her forehead as the image dulled and faded.

"What is it Marianne, what did you see?" Hobbs was crouching down now, one reassuring hand moving to rest on the younger woman's knee.

"A kaleidoscope. I was looking through one. When I took it away from my eye, I could see a big building- I knew it was my homeâ€| Christ, I've never remembered anything that clearly beforeâ€| Mmâ€|" Sighing she blinked a few times before letting her eyes focus on the concerned faces that bored into her own. "That's it. It's all gone."

"You should rest." Hobbs pulled the woman slowly to her feet and moved her toward a cot that had been crammed into one corner of the already overcrowded room.

"I'll be okayâ€| I just need a momentâ€|"

"Well take two." Franklin added, backing up his colleague.

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PART SIX

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Breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out. Marianne stared up at the ceiling, her hands clasped loosely over her belly and her toes wriggling without the constraint of shoes. Dr Franklin had insisted

on her being walked back to her quarters to rest after her earlier flashback and so now she lay here feeling utterly pathetic staring at the shiny black space above her. Still anything was better than feeling as useless and redundant as she had when lolling about on that little cot in the office. A few feet away Franklin himself was rummaging around in the tiny kitchenette Marianne shared with her flatmate, cursing and muttering as he sought clean cups and teabags.

"Are you sure you can find everything?" Marianne propped herself up on her elbows

"Yes. It's fine, stay there."

"I am."

"You sure? Your voice sounds louder." His own had taken on a suspicious tone.

"That's because I'm sitting up." Marianne sighed, moving so that she sat up fully.

"Well don't." He appeared from behind the curtain separating the two rooms; a tea towel slung over one shoulder. "Did *I* tell you you could sit up?"

"No *doctor*." Marianne groaned and flopped back down again. Satisfied with her obedience, Stephen wandered back into the kitchen. "I'm fine you know. It's not as if I *collapsed* or anythingâ€|" She added, turning her head so that she wouldn't have to look at the ceiling anymore. "Well aside from the near permanent dÃ©jÃ  vuâ€|" she murmured to herself.

"Oh really." Franklin re-emerged, a tray containing two mugs and a packet of something in his hands. "Then Dr Hobbs *imagined* your telling her you'd had strange dreams thenâ€|" Marianne sniggered at the sight of her benefactor's attempt at domesticity- he still wore the tea towel.

"You're making too much of this." She retorted. "Can I sit up or do I have to drink that through a straw?"

"Actually I was going to feed you intravenouslyâ€|" Franklin grinned and winked as he handed her a cup. "And anyway, I disagree. Marianne, ever since I've known you it's been like you've been trying to live your life with only half of what you need. We have memories for a reason and you can't go on indefinitely without them."

"Stephen, you know what Dr Raden thoughtâ€|" The tea tasted like dish water and she covered her distaste by reaching for the packet lying on the tray and struggled to open it.

"Marianne, we both know what I think of William Raden. I don't know why he's so against your actively *trying* to regain your memoryâ€|" I know that he was the first doctor to treat you after your accident and that he considers himself to be an expert on memory loss butâ€|" If your inability to remember *is* because you've somehow repressed the memory as opposed to having suffered physical *damage* to your memory centers then maybe we should work on itâ€|"

"I know, I knowâ€¦ I justâ€¦ Stephen I \*like\* my life the way it isâ€¦ I'm not sure that I want it to changeâ€¦ But, if I'm going to keep having these flashbacks then maybe things \*are\* going to change so I'd better prepare myself." She forced herself to take another sip and watched, amused as Franklin did the same and almost spat a mouthful of his drink over her.

"Lordâ€¦ That is \*awful\*â€¦ I've never been able to make tea! It seems so \*easy\*, all that's involved is mixing a couple of liquids together and swirling a bag in itâ€¦"

"There's your problem. Tea making is an \*art\*. I can tell you didn't even use a pot!" Marianne wagged her finger at him, fighting to keep a grin off her face and failing.

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She was worse today. Having seen her chart and received reports from some of the other volunteers, Lennier steeled himself against the woeful sight before him. Palorr's condition had certainly escalated: her formally robust figure was now that of a withered invalid, her whole body shivered with cold and she was rendered almost unrecognisable by the sores that covered her. Barely able to speak, she made an attempt at a wan smile that stretched the already weeping sores painfully. Lennier forced himself not to wince or turn away. Seating himself at her side, he placed one gentle hand over one of her own and moved closer so that he could speak softly.

"How are you today Palorr?" The female merely blinked in reply, not wanting to waste what little energy she had remaining on stating the obvious. From her bed she had stared up at the ward around her for every hour of every day that she did not spend sedated. And, largely left to herself by her busily healthy former colleagues she had been able to observe the behaviour of many of her friends over the past few days.

"Lennier, what is it you have to confess?" Her words were little more than a dry rasp but she was certain that the minbari had heard her for he bowed his head, his eyes closed in shame or embarrassment- she couldn't be certain which.

"I am here to ask after \*you\*. My problems are insignificant." It was a typically minbari answer and Palorr almost laughed.

"Lennier, you \*do\* have a problem. I should like to help. As you can see, I have no \*problem\*," the minbari stared at her in confusion, "I am going to die. That is not a \*problem\*, it is simply the way things are. My fate cannot be altered, perhaps yours can." Sensing that he had relented, Palorr prodded him a little further, "Tell me about Marianne Charlton."

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It was warm. Her eyes still closed; she turned to face the sun, fascinated by the bright orange glow on the inside of her own eyelids. All around her sounded the echoes of other's footsteps, but too busy enjoying the great outdoors, she tuned them out.

There was only the heat of the seldom seen sun on her face. Nothing else was of any importance.

An impatient cough from behind her forced her to turn to its owner and greet the sinking feeling of one who has 'things to attend to'. No more sunshine. And no more rain. Back indoors where the walls were cool and clammy inspite of the constant stuffy warmth.

"You've got a visitor." The owner of the cough grunted.

The corridors seemed darker than usual after the brilliant sunshine and she took a few moments to let her eyes grow accustomed to the gloom as numerous gates and doors clanked shut behind her. Moments later, after being led through the silently echoing hallways, a familiar face greeted her with a meek smile and polite bow.

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Gulping for air, Marianne struggled to sit up. Sunlight poured in through the sarong her room-mate had fashioned as a blind and there was no sound other than the rhythmic tick-tick of her old fashioned alarm clock. There was no sign of Franklin, he must have left when she'd fallen asleep, she reasoned. Almost mechanically, Marianne got out of bed and pulled on a sweater and trainers over the pants and T-shirt she had worn to bed. No time to shower, things to do people to see. And one in particular, she added grimly.

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Making something of a fuss about rearranging his clothing as he seated himself, Lennier put off answering his friend's question straight away. It was obvious to him that Pallor would not be put off, or led off the topic some other way and studying his own hands intently, Lennier opened his mouth to speak.

"I have realised that in being here, on this planet, I am breaking a promise I made to a very good friend. I did not realise when I first arrived so that in itself is not my fault, but when I did realise, I did not leave and that is the point at which my promise was broken."

"Continue." Pallor wasn't willing to let her companion escape without telling her anything but the whole truth and realising this, Lennier resigned himself to the fact.

"You understand, of course that what I tell you is to remain in the strictest confidence?" he finally whispered, hazarding a glance into her eyes before edging away again and allowing his gaze to rest on an area of the sheet that covered her.

"Of course. And who would I tell?" Lennier nodded slowly in understanding before he took a deep breath and allowed himself to continue, to finally pour out the entire story. "Several years ago, for reasons I should rather not go into, I found myself on a small colonised moon in Earth space known as Io. While there I met a woman who was about to undergo what humans refer to as the 'death of personality'," here he paused to hazard a glance upward in search of

her understanding and when Pallor signalled her comprehension by means of a weak nod, he continued. "That was the sentence she had been ordered to serve for a crime she had earlier committed. There were some complications and because of possibly fatal side effects the full 'mind wipe' was not carried out. Instead, her memories of her life up until that point were repressed but her personality was to remain intact. For her own and quite compelling reasons Deborah—that was her name, did not ever want to remember her past. And since the presence of anything from her past could in \*theory\* trigger the recurrence of those memories, she asked me to promise that should I ever see her again that I would, in her words, 'walk away'."

"And now she is Marianne Charlton." Pallor finished for him.

"Yes."

"Why did you not leave as soon as you had realised?"

"Iâ€¦" Lennier fixed his gaze on his down turned palms, "We were \*friends\*. Perhaps more than friendsâ€¦ I still find myself missing her after all this timeâ€¦. I have often wondered whom she ended up becoming, how much like the Deborah I knewâ€¦ When I saw her hereâ€¦ At first I tried to leave- immediately. But I found that I could not bear to leave her just yetâ€¦ And now we are all stranded here by the quarantineâ€¦"

"Lennier." Marianne's voice shook Lennier from his musing. Nervously, he turned in his seat to face her; "I need to speak to you, in private." Her face was paler than usual and her hair hung around it in slept on rat-tails. Dressed in clothing that had clearly seen better days, she stood a short distance away, her hands hanging limply at her sides.

"Go." Pallor whispered to the minbari, "I will still be here when you return."

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Moving quickly ahead of him, Marianne reached a low bench a few meters from the temple in the silent and deserted street. Seating herself she patted the space next to her and obediently Lennier joined her.

"What is going on Lennier? I know that you've been uncomfortable around me- avoiding me evenâ€¦ Do we have a problem?"

"Marianne, I do not see a 'problem'." Refusing to match her stare, the Minbari stared instead at a patch of ground a few feet ahead.

"Fine. I suppose I'll have to take your word for it." She sounded defeated, hurt perhaps and Lennier was suddenly struck by the need to reassure her,

"Minbari do not lie." She nodded now and let her head drop forward, stretching out the multitude of kinks in the back of her neck.

"Thenâ€¦ There's something elseâ€¦ And since you don't lieâ€¦" Once

again upright she fixed him with her gaze. "I've been having dreamsâ€¦ flashbacksâ€¦" Lennier felt his heart begin to pound, bleeding racing in his ears, colour rising to his typically pale face and he looked away. "I saw someone I recognisedâ€¦. A Minbariâ€¦. Was it you?"

Lennier found that he could scarcely hear her over the rush of panic as hastily he leapt to his feet. "Marianne, I amâ€¦\*glad\* that you feel that you are making progress in regaining your memoryâ€¦ Saddened by any distress you may be experiencing but I am not sure that I am the right person to-"

"I was in a prisonâ€¦ It \*was\* you I saw, wasn't it? Lennier," now she rose to place one hand gently on his arm, cocking her head so that she could see his expression; "It's alrightâ€¦ I felt thatâ€¦ I don't think that I want to know moreâ€¦ I get the feeling that we're in agreement on \*that\* one, right? I've never 'striven' to learn about my past- I've always felt that it's been buried for a reasonâ€¦ I've always been happy to leave things alone. But I feel that I'm linked to you for some reason- that you're linked to my pastâ€¦ I just want to know if I'm right. A simple yes or no will do, and then I'll leave it be."

"You \*are\* right." Lennier heard himself answer. "But I cannot help you any furtherâ€¦ To do so would mean that I had to break a promiseâ€¦"

"Alright." Loosening her grip on his arm, Marianne let the minbari walk away and staring out across the street she wondered at her acceptance of what was happening to her.

"Marianne? How did it go?" Dr Franklin was suddenly at her side, concern etched into his features. "What did he say?"

"It's okay. I'm not going to ask him anything else. I'm happy enough to remain ignorant of my pastâ€¦"

"What if the flashbacks won't let you?"

"Then I'll cross that bridge when I come to it." She could tell that her friend wasn't going to be as accepting as she but that was not her concern. Turning silently, Marianne headed back into the temple. Stephen however did not follow, choosing instead to hurry off in the direction he had seen Lennier take. \*Something\* was going on and he \*didn't\* like it. Even if Marianne was willing to leave things be for now, to let Lennier off the hook, that didn't mean that \*he\* could. And besides, Stephen knew that someday certain questions wouldn't let themselves be ignored. And when that happened, he intended to make sure that he was there to help answer them.

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PART SEVEN

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How many more stepsâ€¦ Franklin stopped to catch his breath and stared up into the tower that stretched up above him, then back down into the well below. Damned Lumati with their need for impossibly tall buildingsâ€¦ For what seemed like the hundredth time, the doctor also wished he'd spent as much time keeping in shape as he insisted most of his Earthforce patients did. Adjusting his surgical coat on his arm where he'd draped it having shrugged the garment off three storeys ago, Stephen continued his ascent. A short time ago he'd begun hurrying after Lennier in a bid to discover the truth about what was fast turning into a mystery worthy of any prime time soap opera. Lennier knew something about Stephen's protÃ©gÃ©, Marianne: something he wasn't willing to volunteer. Besides that, the doctor still hadn't yet had the chance to find out why the former Ranger was avoiding him and had been since his own arrival on the Lumati homeworld.

Trying to suppress his heavy panting, Stephen reached the fourteenth floor and started rapping exhaustedly on the door before him.

"Lennier? It's Dr Franklin. I think you should open the door. I'm not going to leave until we've spoken."

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Having left Marianne standing and staring after him, Lennier had hurried away, his every instinct screaming at him to run, leave this place with its air of death and secrecy. Instead he had steeled himself to the reality that escape was not an option.

But she hadn't asked anything of him. Not really. Besides asking him whether or not he had known her before, she had more or less let him offâ€¦ For now anyway. And now that his body and mind had finished their panicked exertions, forcing the blood through his veins and the surge of adrenaline had died away, he was left with the realisation that sooner or later he \*would\* have to betray the promise he had made to Deborah.

The rooms he shared with Grare seemed even smaller and more claustrophobic than ever and lying on his bunk, the Minbari was reminded of the tiny and cramped cockpits of the minbari fighters he'd piloted as a member of the Anla'shok. Staring up at the black and glassy ceiling not far above his head, Lennier recalled his dramatic exit from Delenn's White Star after he'd betrayed her and her husband all that time ago.

All that timeâ€¦ Lennier realised now that it did not hurt him to think of Sheridan as Delenn's life partnerâ€¦ Nor did it cause him any pain to think of the Anla'shok. Rather he felt only sorrow for his betrayal of them. And his betrayal of himself. But now, just as he had felt trapped within that White Star by his choices and mistakes, he felt equally so now. Pointless as it was, the former ranger found himself wishing that he could turn the clock back.

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Franklin expected more of a struggle and was surprised and oddly disconcerted to hear a command for the door to be opened almost immediately. Truth be told, the doctor had rehearsed a speech of

sorts and now, standing in the tiny and sparsely decorated rooms he found himself at a loss for what to say.

"I think that I expected you." In spite of the dark colour of the walls, ceiling and floor of the room, the room was bright from the midday light that poured in through the open shutters at the window. Lennier lay flat on his bunk, still fully clothed and shod- unusual for a Minbari, Stephen mused. And particularly unusual for Lennier whom the doctor had always found to be well mannered to the point of annoyance. Franklin had expected to find the minbari stood to attention at his door, hands folded and ready to bow in greeting. This was \*not\* the Lennier that Franklin had known on Babylon5.

"Then you know why I'm here." Franklin ventured, stepping further into the room.

"This is about my conversation with Miss Charlton." Lennier affirmed flatly and Franklin thought that he heard something strange in the minbari's voice- not defiance exactly but not compliance either. "As I told her, I am not at liberty to discuss this-"

"I'm not just here about that." Franklin cut in, catching the ranger by surprise. Lennier propped himself up on his elbows and swung his feet around to land flat on the floor. Then, slumped forward on his elbows, the minbari remained seated in this strangely lazy position- strange for a Minbari anyway. "You've been avoiding me ever since my arrival hereâ€¦ I got the feeling from President Sheridan, when I spoke to him last that you had left the Rangers very suddenlyâ€¦ He didn't seem to want to tell me why though-"

"He has not spoken of it?" Confusion made it's way across the formerly schooled features of the ranger.

"Nope. Whatever happened, John said it was between you and Delenn." Lennier's lips momentarily formed a surprised 'O' and he stood up, moving over to the tiny kitchen area where he rested his hands on the cool surface of the edge of the sink.

"I will not speak on either matter. The first because to do so would require me to break a confidence and the second because since Sheridan did not consider it to be any of your concern, I do not either."

"Lennier, I care about Marianne- a lot. I've been her doctor ever since Doctor Raden assigned her to me after her accident. \*He\* was so against working toward reversing Marianne's amnesia that I began to suspect that there might have been more to the accident than we were led to believeâ€¦ I intend to do all I can to protect her and to that end I have to know if her regaining her memory of her life before her 'accident' will put her in any danger."

"Danger?" Lennier whirled around to face his visitor, his hands levering him away from the sink edge slightly.

"Yes. I've known of cases- people who have been relocated by the government after giving evidence in courtâ€¦ or 'disappearing' because of information they haveâ€¦." Franklin was fishing, Lennier could tell that the man knew nothing. Relaxing, although not visibly, Lennier stared through his interviewer.

"You are mistaken."

"Am I. Well, whatever. But if Marianne suffers because of your refusal to co-operate I \*will\* find you." Stephen did his best to look stern as he got to his feet and moved toward the door.

"Doctor, in my own way I am trying to help her also. But I cannot break the promise I have made toâ€¦ Another."

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"Where's Stephen?" Dr Hobbs question brought Marianne out of her semi-trance and recovering from her start, the younger woman turned to face her new friend, swivelling in her chair, "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle youâ€¦"

"It's okayâ€¦ I've been pretty on edge all day. Since I've been practically jumping at my own \*shadow\* my starting every time speaks to me is hardly surprising." Waving off Hobbs' concern, Marianne got cautiously to her feet and headed toward the ever-ready coffee maker. "Dr Franklin insisted on following Lennier."

"I see. What's going on Marianne?"

"You're asking me?" Marianne allowed a small grin to break through and stood back from the machine, newly filled mug in hand. "All these flashbacks- or whatever they are- they had me confused and frightenedâ€¦ I think Stephen got me 'fired up' for answers- you know how he is- can't just leave anything alone. He's been like a child picking at a scab over thisâ€¦ I was so sure that I wanted to know everything- for about five minutes anywayâ€¦ Something stopped meâ€¦ self-preservation perhaps. I think I'm better off leaving it be- at least for nowâ€¦" Distractedly Marianne reached one arm forward to fiddle with a stack of loose leafed papers on the desk before her, tugging a few stray ones into line with the rest. "We're in the middle of the viral equivalent of a war-zone- this is hardly the time for voyages of self discovery!" Out of the corner of her eye, Marianne could see Hobbs studying her profile, and she turned to match her stare.

"And if the flashbacks continue? To the point that they interfere with your ability to concentrate on your work?"

"If \*that's\* going to happen then there's no real way of preventing it. It won't matter if I leave things be or carry on digging."

"But the more you know, the more easily you'll be able to put everything into context- understand it, stop \*fearing\* it." Marianne sighed and looked down at the mug of coffee her hands cradled in her lap,

"I don't think that any sort of \*preparation\* is going to lessen the blowâ€¦ A part of me seems to know that no matter how weird, stressful and \*mad\* my life is \*now\*, it used to be \*worse\*"

"That could just be your nervousness speakingâ€¦ All this cloak and dagger stuff might just have got you worriedâ€¦ Lennier has been veryâ€¦ \*dramatic\*â€¦"

"How do you mean?" Marianne's attention left the cup and returned, as a frown to her questioner.

"All this \*avoidance\* and \*secrecy\*â€| His running off to the shuttle hangar and trying to leave the planetâ€|" Suddenly an idea came to her, "What if it's not \*you\* he's trying to protect. Maybe you used to know something about his pastâ€| Stephen mentioned that Lennier used to be a Ranger but that he left and disappeared very suddenly and that the subject is pretty much a tabooâ€|. Marianne, perhaps you \*should\* stay away from him for your \*own\* sakeâ€|"

"Lillian, don't be ridiculousâ€| I know I've not known him for long but Lennier doesn't have a \*malicious\* bone in his body!"

"Marianneâ€|" Hobbs crouched down at her friend's chair and touched one hand to her arm; "All I'm asking is that you watch your stepâ€| Being able to trust people is a \*wonderful\* gift but just \*be careful\*. He's done nothing to \*earn\* your trust."

"Yes he has. You've seen how hard he works. How much he \*cares\*. How can someone who does such \*good\*, who gives himself so selflessly, be capable of doing or wanting to do harm?" Seeing that arguing would be pointless, Lillian rose awkwardly to her feet and retreated to her own work station, the gentle sound of Marianne hesitantly calling her back caused her to stop in her tracks and turn slightly toward the younger woman, "Thank you for caringâ€| "

"Anytime."

Now alone, Marianne rejected her now lukewarm coffee mid-sip, wincing with distaste and setting it down on a pile of folders an arm's length away. Out on the ward, she could hear the metallic clank of bedpans being replaced and empty syringes being thrown into kidney dishes to await disposal. There were few voices, and those that did speak did so in such low murmurs that no words could be made out. Shutting her eyes, Marianne concentrated on blocking out those sounds and raised slightly clammy palms to cover her eyelids. There was little use in trying to focus on work today.

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"Damn! Damn, damn and damn!" Stephen stormed into the office, a file clasped in one hand and his coattails flapping. "I thought we were onto something, I really didâ€| I can't believe the combination didn't work!" It was two days after Marianne's decision not to actively work toward regaining her memory and those two days had passed in a blur. On his way back from Lennier's quarters, still fuming with anger, Franklin had been hit by a sudden stroke of genius and had run the full journey back to the hospice in his excitement. He knew of a new approach to treating the disorder that was steadily working its way through the Lumati population. And so from that moment until now, the whole hospice had been a hive of activity and perhaps more importantly, \*hope\*. One of the volunteers had even noticed that this hope seemed to extend to the patientsâ€|

All that changed when the first death in eleven hours drove Franklin into the office, his face haggard and his eyes filled with tears.

"What's happened? It hasn't adapted already!" Lillian was on her feet in an instant, the colour draining from her face. Marianne stayed at her desk, her heart which had, for the past two days formed a heavy and awkward lump in her mouth now plummeting to her feet.

"No, it hasn't \*adapted\*" the man snapped, resting one hand against a wall to support him.

"I don't understand?" Hobbs moved to take the folder from Stephen's limp grasp and started opened it, thumbing through it's pages until she suddenly froze and her eyes met his in horror, "It's \*mutated\*?"

"Yes it's \*mutated\*!" Franklin almost smirked as he copied her tone.

"How can that be possible? We checked and rechecked everythingâ€¦" Dr Hobbs was frantically turning the pages of the report, looking for answers, even clues to answers and yet finding none.

"Well, it \*did\*. And that's not the worst of it either." Franklin sank onto the edge of a desk and passed one hand over weary eyes. "Pallor is one of those who showed signs of improvementâ€¦ She's deteriorating rapidlyâ€¦ I don't think she'll survive the nightâ€¦" The man now ceased fighting back his tears and instead allowed them to fall unhindered. Hobbs abandoned the file, dropping it to the floor and moved to wrap her arms around him, trying fruitlessly to support the weight of the heavily built man."

"If the disease as mutated again, we might all be susceptible to contamination." Marianne's voice, flat with shock cut through the room, forcing her two superiors to look around at her. "Everyone should be re-tested. And the others should be told about Pallor's condition-"

"Grare was assisting me with my rounds this morning, he said he'd pass it on." Composing himself, Stephen extricated himself from Hobbs' arms and wiped the sleeve of his lab coat over his face. "Right, rightâ€¦ Panic over, now we need to focus." Mentally tidying his pain away in the recesses of his mind, Franklin retrieved the file from the floor and smoothed one hand thoughtfully over his hair. "There are still a few more avenues we've not investigatedâ€¦ We should get straight on with it. Lillian, you okay?"

"Fine. Just give me a moment." Retreating to her own desk, Lillian took several deep breaths and hands on hips stared up at the ceiling as she willed herself not to cry."

"Right." Suddenly awkward, Stephen stowed the file under his arm and checked his beast pocket for a pen; "I'll be one the ward if anyone needs me." Turning abruptly, the man all but ran from the tiny room and now alone, Marianne swivelled in her chair to pass a roll of tissue to Lillian.

"I'll be alrightâ€¦" Lillian took the tissue and tore off a large strip, which she used to dab at her eyes, ever watchful of the make up she wore and blew her nose. "I can't just switch my emotions on and off. Never couldâ€¦ death affects me as much now as it did when I was a medical studentâ€¦"

"It's okay. There's no need to explain. When I get home tonight I'll probably start screaming and breaking thingsâ€¦ For now though I'm just going to focus on the task in hand- I'm not going to \*do\* emotions today!" Half grinning at her friend and receiving a wan smile in return, Marianne turned back to her screen.

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## PART EIGHT

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"Now that it is finally in sight, I find that the thought of meeting my end is not so terrifying as I had always imagined." Pallor's condition had worsened beyond belief to render her virtually unrecognisable. Lennier had rushed to her side the moment he heard the news from Grare and now he sat in his usual place at her bedside. "I do not think that there is anything to fear from death: the gods will protect me from harm. What frightens the living most is probably what leads to that: the pain and suffering that are a part of the actual act of dying." Pallor seemed oddly lucid, Lennier considered and not for the first time he found that he envied her composure. "All that I have not yet done- the things I have never seen, heard or knownâ€¦ All I can do now is regret that.."

"Pallor, you should have nothing to regret: you have spent your life \*giving\*. You volunteered to come to a world ravaged by a plague that we could not know we would be safe fromâ€¦"

"Lennier, my life \*prior\* to that was hardly a \*selfless\* one- I have things to be ashamed of tooâ€¦"

"As do we allâ€¦"

"Lennier, I cannot pretend to know what it is that has been troubling you so, but I am sure that you are inherently a \*good\* person and that whatever mistakes you might have made in the past, that they are more than outweighed by your good deeds here if none other! I sense in you a great decision that you are having difficulty making- I am certain that whatever you decide that it will be made in the interest of preserving the \*rightness\* of the universe- no matter how painful that might be. And now, you may leave me to rest. You've other patients to care for and other fears to counselâ€¦" The Drazi female's eyes slid shut as she fell into a fitful sleep and in so doing, signalled the end of their conversation. Lennier was left to watch her mutely for long moments before rising slowly from his seat and turning to leave.

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"That all of it?" Marianne shoved a couple of pill-jars into her rucksack and pulled the drawstring tight. Tiredly her assistant nodded and handed her the heavy doctor's bag he had just filled. "Right, let's go. Lillian, we're offâ€¦ journey should take us about ten minutes- we'll stay in contact. From her station, the doctor waved one distracted hand,

"Take care won't youâ€¦ I'll send Stephen to join you when he gets back."

"Fine. Grare, we're off!" Marianne called out to the small Brakiri male who, realising that he was included in the party, hurried over to join them, taking the doctor's bag from her hand and clutching it to his chest.

"You've a bag already." He explained as if to a child when she opened her mouth to argue.

"Are you sure? It's heavyâ€¦" Grare made no verbal reply, merely ushering her on with a shooing motion of his hands. "Alrightâ€¦ Come onâ€¦"

Lillian watched the two medics lurch toward the door, straining under the weight of their bags with something akin to a smile on her lips.

"Should they not wait until Dr Franklin finished his rounds?" Lennier appeared beside her, unnoticed until he spoke, a clipboard held out awaiting her perusal.

"No timeâ€¦ We need to know the extent of the infection in the monasteryâ€¦ He can join them when he's finished- if there's any pointâ€¦" Lillian tried to hide her hopeless expression and failed.

"I knowâ€¦ We still have no cure. Marianne is probably wise to suggest that people remain in their homes in cases where the whole family is infected. We've no room hereâ€¦"

"I know but it still seemsâ€¦ I don't knowâ€¦ 'Callous'- Expecting them to cope themselves with only out-patient care.."

"Doctor, we are doing all that we can. So how can our actions be 'callous'? This disease has proven itself to be one hundred percent infectious and one hundred percent terminal to the Lumati population. For now all that we can do is make people comfortable and find a way to vaccinate the uninfected. Have you had any more leadsâ€¦?"

"No. It's only a matter of time before the plague adjusts itself to \*our\* bodies as wellâ€¦"

"Wellâ€¦ Then there is no more time to be wasted, I will continue with my work and you will continue with yours." The minbari gave a sharp nod and backed away, turning and moving off through the ward. Not allowing herself the opportunity to brood any longer on their plight, Lillian returned to the office.

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Stepping out into the street, Marianne tugged a scarf from a pocket in the front of her bag and proceeded to wrap it about her head. Silently, Grare followed suit with the scarf already draped over his shoulders. Over their several excursions to the poorest and worst infected districts of the city, the medics had found the Lumati to be increasingly desperate for a cure and had become almost violent toward the still healthy medical staff. Disguising themselves as Lumati had become the safest option.

"How about we stick together this time around? I don't want a repeat of yesterday's anticsâ€|"

"Indeedâ€|" Grare concentrated on his boots, grateful that Brakiri do not 'blush'. "I am truly sorry for yesterdaysâ€|"

"Grare, will you \*please\* stop apologising! I've told you that it could have happened to any of us... That Lumati was \*mad\*! If you'd not handed over your bag who knows what he might have done! The medication is replaceable, \*you\* are not. We need more commlinks; it's as simple as that. It's ridiculous us having to share each between two!"

"How long will it be before the next shipment of supplies comes in?"

"I don't knowâ€| We'll just have to muddle through until then, I guess. But in the meantime, no risk taking and we stick together like glueâ€|. Here we areâ€|. Sooner we get started the sooner we'll finish."

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"Not too healthy." Lillian pored over the numerous tables presented on her computer screen, Adam, one of the medical technicians hovering at her shoulder. "A few more days and the well will be truly dryâ€|"

"Can we afford more supplies without asking for more funding?" Adam was dubiously eyeing the almost empty shelves around them.

"I doubt itâ€| Looks like as our official go-between, you'll have to stellar-com EarthGov with a begging bowlâ€|"

"Greatâ€| They're not as sympathetic as they wereâ€| Our being here is little more than a PR exercise on the government's behalf and now it's getting more expensiveâ€| "

"I know-"

"And what do we tell them about the possibility of the disease spreading to other non-Lumati species? They might try to pull us all backâ€|"

"I know \*that\* too. Can we hold off telling them until our research is completed? No sense in causing panic before we have all the answersâ€|"

"Perhapsâ€| Alright, but I'm not going to \*lie\* about this." Nodding distractedly, Lillian sat back in her chair, her gaze still fixed on the table that showed the extent of their financial worries. Only hours ago, Marianne had returned from the monastery, her expression tight with repressed emotion. They had been too late; none of the infected in the large building had been living when she and Grare arrived. It seemed obvious to her and the rest of the medics that by now their chances of finding a cure or even a vaccine for this plague was little more than a pipe dream. In reality the Lumati homeworld had become little more than a giant hospice, a dying room. And Lillian and the rest of the medics could do little more helpful than



empty bedpans and watch as an entire species was wiped out.

But still, there was no point in admitting \*that\* to EarthGov. As Adam had so gently pointed out, the government would see no glory, nor added votes in such a helpless situation. It was best that all outsiders were indulged, at least for the time being- No use in telling the whole truth until there was absolutely no other alternativeâ€|.

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The second monastery, visited by Marianne and Grare the next day, was hardly more than a filthy building filled to bursting point with the pitifully ill. And fighting back her nausea at the stench of the place, she led him through the winding corridors until they reached a relatively free space wherein they could set up their equipment. As they lugged their heavy bags through the maze-like passageways, they were followed by an ever-growing queue of Lumati who limped behind the medics like street-dwelling dogs chasing a meal.

"This'll have to do." Marianne dropped her bag to the floor and took a deep breath of the foul air. Grare followed suit. "You hand out the painkillers and I'll clean and bandage any external soresâ€| By then the others should be here with food. Agreed?" At her companion's brief nod, she pulled her bag up onto a nearby table and beckoned their first patient forward.

Four hours later they were less than a quarter of the way through the queue, which appeared to be growing all the while. Swiping at the beads of perspiration that now decorated her brow with the sleeve of her shirt, Marianne paused for a quick breather. A few feet away, Grare was still wielding a syringe, untiringly injecting each new patient before moving them on.

Letting herself slump against the table behind her, Marianne forced her attention back to the task in hand. They had long since run out of proper dressings and now resorted to cloth torn into strips like old fashioned bandages. Before her, a Lumati female waited patiently, one partially bandaged hand held out awaiting completion and with only half a mind, Marianne fumbled behind her for something sharp with which to cut yet another sheet into pieces. The lasers usually used for such a task were back at the hospice and for the past few hours she had relied on a pair of scissors quite unused to such a purpose. They had become blunt and then fallen apart half an hour ago. Tutting with annoyance, she turned to her table.

The small room they worked in had only one source of light the skylight above them and sunlight poured through in sharp, piercing streaks that blinded with it's intensity and served little real other use. Now that light focused all it's efforts on the scalpel a few inches across the table from where Marianne stood, forcing out a beam so bright that for a moment she had to squint before becoming oddly fascinated by the sight of it.

Grare turned from his patient to see his companion staring into her reflection in the blade of a scalpel, the light reflecting from it to mark a slightly wavering stripe across her face.

"Marianne? Are you alright?" He received no answer and pushing gently past the man he had been treating he moved to touch her arm.

"Marianne?" With a sudden shriek she recoiled, backing away from him, one hand covering the spot on her arm where he had touched her as if nursing a wound. In a flash, the scalpel was in her other hand and held up in a threatening stance,

"Get away from me!" Her voice raised from it's usual tone with her growing hysteria as she continued to back away into the crowd of sick Lumati that formed four thick walls about the two medics. Somewhere in his shocked brain, Grare registered that Marianne's eyes held a wild, glazed quality, like the eyes of sleepwalkers or someone still not quite awake. Filing this observation for later, he lowered his voice and held his palms out flat, placatingly as he slowly advanced toward his hysterical friend,

"Marianne, it's okay, you're alright- no one's going to hurt youâ€¦ Give me the knifeâ€¦" He almost managed it, he could see her grip loosening and her face slacken from it's previous tightness of expression. She still continued to back away until her back came into sudden contact with the body of one of the crowd. Her hand tightened around her weapon and she spun around to strike out at the body. Seeing his window of opportunity, Grare stepped quickly forward to grab at her scalpel-wielding hand, his arms coming around hers to restrain them, he pulled her still resisting body down to the ground.

Around them the swarming Lumati jostled for a view of the screaming, struggling woman. "Please move backâ€¦ It is over nowâ€¦ Move back!" Grare's pleading for a little space went unheard and he found the floor around himself and Marianne recede under the feet of the advancing crowd- they were in danger of being trampled. Marianne was still wailing and trying to push him away but Grare managed to hold onto her with a strength that belied his frail form.

When Franklin and the rest of his team arrived with more supplies they found Grare knelt on the ground, holding a now unconscious Marianne loosely in his lap. He'd managed to sedate her but was still surrounded by confused and sick Lumati.

"Alright, I need everyone to move backâ€¦ " With a little more force than he would normally use on those so ill, Stephen reached his colleagues, "Adam, get that food handed out- away from here, that should help convince these people to moveâ€¦ Grare, what happened?" Now kneeling himself, Stephen checked Marianne's pulse and satisfied that she was still alive, let himself relax momentarily.

"I cannot tell youâ€¦ One moment she was fine and the next she became hysterical- threatened me with a knife! I think that she is not herself." Smiling grimly at the Brakiri's understatement, Franklin moved to pull the unconscious woman into his arms.

"Let's get her out of here and deal with the wheres and whys laterâ€¦"

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PART NINE

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Where did all this red stuff come from? Frantically wiping her sticky hands off on her clothing, she stared around her at her new surroundings. The walls were a kind of once-white grey and almost greasy to the touch and the hard bench she sat upon felt cold through her pyjamas. This room was silent but for her panting breath which almost echoed in the small space.

She didn't know how she had ended up there; at least she didn't think she did. The odd, violent flashes that came to her in waves like nausea must be a dream, she reasoned. Afterall, how could images so terrible belong in her waking world?

She remembered a cold, wet surface- tarmac beneath her bare feet; cold, hard rain hitting her scalp through the parting of her hair; the cool, whispering brush of net curtain, disturbed by a breeze and rubbing at her bare ankles. The sight of her reflection in the silver surface of a clean knife.

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Loud, piercing screams startled Stephen into wakefulness; slouched in the chair he'd sat in four hours ago. Still half asleep the doctor hurried back into Marianne's darkened bedroom to find the young woman sitting upright in bed, one fist rammed into her mouth to stifle her own sobs. With movements as automatic and caring as those of a father, Franklin pulled her into a tight hug, one hand rising of it's own volition to pet her sweat-soaked hair.

"It's okay, it's okay. You had a bad dream but you're safe now." His voice soothing her, he gently rocked her from side to side until finally she calmed a little. As her sobs ebbed away he held her away from him, cupping her face in his hands, "It's all okay."

"What happened?" her voice sounded alien to them both and Franklin noticed that she seemed to be looking through him,

"You had some sort of. I don't know. 'episode'. In the monastery. Grare had to sedate you. That was about five hours ago. You've been sleeping ever since. Do you remember?" Numbly she shook her head and he reached over to the bedside cabinet to retrieve a roll of toilet tissue. Tearing some off he handed it to her and watched as she used it to mop savagely at her tear-reddened eyes. "I don't suppose you remember what you were dreaming about?" She hesitated, her attention fixing itself firmly on the tissue that disintegrated in her wet palm, then shook her head. Franklin noticed her hesitation but decided not to pursue it- yet. Instead he tucked one limp lock of hair behind her ear and rubbed one of her arms encouragingly.

"Thanks for staying with me." She mumbled before using a clean piece of tissue to noisily blow her nose. In reply he shrugged and was about to speak when a soft sound from the commlink still attached to the back of his hand, alerted them both to an incoming message.

"This is Franklin."

//Doctor, we've a stellarcom transmission from Earth. You need to see it. There's a problem.//

"I'll be right there. Franklin out." Raising one eyebrow at the woman beside him, Stephen rose to his feet, ignoring the creak of his protesting knee joints, "That was a little vagueâ€|" he muttered half to himself before looking at Marianne intently, "Will you be okay for a while?" She nodded again,

"I'll probably not sleep again for a while anywayâ€|" she managed a smile and a shrug, fake bravado more for her own benefit than his.

"Okayâ€| I'll be as quick as I can."

When a few minutes later, she was at last alone, Marianne slowly kicked back the bedcovers and slid out of it. Under the cruel blue-toned light of the washroom, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. There were the usual dark circles under her eyes and her skin had grown progressively paler and more wax-like since she had arrived on the Lumati homeworld, this she knew already. But now it seemed almost as if she were seeing this face for the first time. There was a furtive look to the watery grey eyes and a slackness to the jaw.

On a sudden impulse, Marianne held up her hands for inspection: the nails were jagged and bitten, the fingers long and bony, the skin so white as to be almost translucent.

In a sudden flash, those hands were covered in hot, sticky bloodâ€| Then in less than a blink, they were naked white again. Marianne blinked once more and peered back into the strange mirror-girl's eyes. Who the hell was she?

Hurrying back into the bedroom, Marianne tugged a pair of slacks from their crumpled state hanging over a chair and forced uncooperative legs into their confines. She pulled a well-worn cardigan, which usually doubled as a dressing gown; over the T-shirt she had slept in and found a pair of trainers under the bed. Without a moment's thought, Marianne all but ran out of the room.

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The rooms Lennier shared with Grare were even warmer and stuffier than usual and the Minbari kicked off his boots to feel the smooth floor beneath the bare soles of his feet. The floor wasn't cool but it felt good to stretch toes that had spent fourteen hours trapped inside shoes.

Pallor had died tonight. With little more than a rasping gasp for a breath that would not come, she had let her head fall back into her pillow and sank into death like a stone, utterly transformed from the strong and proud Drazi female who had arrived with him several months ago.

He had stayed with her, watching, waiting, aware that he was doing so and ashamed of himself for hoping her time would come soon. Walking slowly through the temple afterward he'd noticed distantly how little everything had changed, how the day to day continued. Outside the sky had been the same wistful grey as it had been when he had gone in and the journey from the temple to his rooms had been as long and uneventful as had been his earlier one in the opposite

direction.

Now, as he concentrated on the task of spreading out the triangular mat he used for his meditation, he realised that he felt only one thing: guilt. He felt no sadness- he had mourned Pallor long ago when there was still a life inside the ulcerated shell that fought for life and that spoke with dignity. He felt no peace, he had long since given up on ever feeling \*that\*. But he felt guilt, an emotion he was all too familiar with.

Guilt. Because when he had received the news that Pallor was taking her final breaths and asking for him, he had been more concerned by the worry in his friend Grare's eyes, by the news that \*he\* brought, that Marianne had collapsed, that Marianne \*hurt\*. As far as he could be concerned, Pallor could wait. And so when Grare had insisted that as always, 'the patient' should come first he had impatiently and resentfully hurried to Pallor's deathbed, his thoughts centred wholly on someone else.

Folding his hands into a simulation of composure he did not feel Lennier knelt facing the open door, closed his eyes against the guilt he still felt and pretended to meditate.

Barely an hour later, the sound of a heavy tread on the stairs leading to his rooms, Lennier's eyes snapped open.

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Knelt upon his prayer mat and staring unblinking through the open doorway, Lennier took in the sight before him. Marianne was hovering at the top of the stairs catching her breath and smoothing clammy hands over her creased and mucky pants. Her hair, straggly and damp with perspiration was escaping from the rubber band it had been scraped into earlier and what might once have been a coffee stain several washes ago adorned the front of her T-shirt. She was nervously chewing on her lower lip, bringing a flash of colour to an otherwise pale and waxy complexion. He thought that she looked the most like Deborah that he'd ever known her to.

"Lennier, help meâ€¦ I don't want to know anymoreâ€¦ I know all I need to but theâ€¦ picturesâ€¦ imagesâ€¦ they won't leave me aloneâ€¦" On shaky legs, Marianne advanced toward him, the dim light etching it's way over her features as she left the darkness of the stairway behind her. Still silent, Lennier rose smoothly to his feet and took her hands hesitantly into his own.

"I cannot help youâ€¦" She thought that he sounded as fearful of her memories as she and for a moment Marianne forgot that it was \*she\* who had approached \*him\* for help and not the other way around.

"It's alright, I knowâ€¦" Her voice dropping to an inaudible whisper, she pulled him into a strong embrace, one hand cupping the back of his neck to press him closer to her. For Lennier it seemed as if she were not only holding him upright, but that she was also holding him \*together\*.

A few feet away and in all directions, the candles he'd lit earlier to pray by, flickered, casting their shadows across the walls, ceiling and floor.

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Most of the candles that lit the small space had burned down to nearly half their length. Lennier barely noticed. Lying quietly in the circle of his arms, her back to him, Marianne pulled absently on the silver cross around her neck. At some point in the evening, Lennier had suddenly remembered that it was *he* who should be supporting her and to that end, he had turned her in his arms and pulled her down the floor with him. She'd kicked off her shoes at some point and they now sat beside his own boots. Surprisingly, there was little difference in size between the two pairs and that strange fact had led the minbari to reach for and hold up her hand for inspection. Pressed flat against his own palm, Marianne's hand was almost the same size and held similar cuts and calluses to that of his own but to a lesser extent. This woman was *not* a former member of the Anla'shok. But these hands *had* known the harshness of *prison* life and that fact alone served to remind him, yet again that they used to belong to Deborah.

"I don't know who I used to be. But I know that I don't want to be her again." Marianne's voice was stronger now, "It was the 'death of personality', wasn't it? I thought about it, narrowed down the optionsâ€¦ It's the only thing that's leftâ€¦"

"Yes."

"How do you know me?"

"I knewâ€¦ yourâ€¦ 'alter-ego'â€¦ I made a promise to her that I would not stand in the way of her leading a life apart from her past."

"Wellâ€¦ You triedâ€¦" She'd let go of the cross around her neck and now brought her free hand down to cover his, sandwiching it between her palms. "How close were you? Were youâ€¦ lovers?"

"No. At least not 'physically'."

"I suppose in a prison that would have been difficultâ€¦ You still miss her?"

"Of course."

"It must have been terrible- me showing up hereâ€¦"

"It is not your faultâ€¦"

"I never said it was." She stared up at him now, craning her neck to do so. "Was she *very* different to me?"

"No. Not 'very'. She was moreâ€¦ fragile."

"And she committed a crime. For a mind-wipe it must have been murderâ€¦ Did she *want* to undergo the wipe?"

"Yes. In the end she didâ€¦ She wanted to forget the event leading up until that day. It was not a full wipe- a medical condition prevented such action from being possibleâ€¦"

"The epilepsyâ€¦. Of courseâ€¦ I think she's still inside my head. You know, some nights I think that there's someone with meâ€¦ Tonight I \*saw\* her in the mirrorâ€¦ It's not a good feeling and I usually wake up feeling panicked- violated evenâ€¦ Did she go through anything like that?"

"She never discussed anything of that nature with me. But I think that she experienced nightmaresâ€¦"

"Was she a bad person?"

"No!"

"I didn't think soâ€¦"

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When Franklin arrived at the hospice, Hobbs was already there, frantically pacing the small space of the office, tugging at a hangnail until she drew blood.

"Okayâ€¦ what's the problem?" Storming into the room, he barely noticed his colleague's nervous movements, throwing his jacket on a chair and fixing fists to hips in a defiant stance.

"Hello Stephenâ€¦" When Lillian looked up to meet his stare, he noticed how distracted she looked. "We just got a transmission from the support centreâ€¦ Umâ€¦" Suddenly deciding not to relay the transmission's content to him, Lillian backed away toward the monitor in the corner of the tiny room, Stephen followed, folding his arms across his chest as he settled back to watch.

Five minutes later, the transmission ended and Stephen turned to face her, his expression now matching hers,

"They can't do thisâ€¦ Patch me through to themâ€¦"

"They just did. And it won't do any good- I already triedâ€¦. In three days time the biohazard team will arrive to evacuate all uninfected non-Lumatiâ€¦ The planet will remain quarantined from then onwards."

"Oh godâ€¦" Rubbing frantically at his jaw as he began paced, Franklin started muttering under his breath, "They're going to leave these people to \*die\*â€¦ Without medical equipmentâ€¦ staffâ€¦ researchâ€¦ The Lumati haven't a hope in \*hell\*!"

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PART TEN

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Well, this was unexpectedâ€¦ Impatiently brushing unruly locks of hair from her face, Marianne sat up. Beside her and flat out on his back, Lennier slept, his face younger and unusually open in such repose. Like her he was naked, his clothing stacked neatly in a pile, her own strewn over the floor of the tiny room in some sort of

multicoloured tapestry.

Unexpectedâ€¦ Yes, definitely that. Now in the cold morning light, Marianne couldn't pinpoint the moment when things between herself and Lennier had changed. She could remember the unspoken and yet mutual decision that had led her to turn in his arms, neck straining upward, the same decision as had led him to slowly lower his own face so that his lips could meet hers. And she could remember that it had been a sweet, gentle and hesitant kiss, much as she might have imagined it would be- if she'd ever \*allowed\* herself to remember such a thingâ€¦ But still, at some point the decision had been made. And then, later, another decision made unconsciously had deepened that kiss into something that encouraged fingers to trail delicate patterns over first clothed, and later undressed skin; forced him backward to lie on the floor, her head nestled in the crook between head and shoulder.

So, that was what it was all about then. Her first time and presumably his. Two sentient beings and one hard floor- didn't take much, did itâ€¦? And never had it occurred to her that there would be so much messâ€¦

Reaching for what looked suspiciously like her own T-shirt, Marianne pulled it on and struggled to her feet. There was a tiny washroom tagged onto the edge of this room, just as in her own and Marianne made her way into it's near-privacy, sliding the frosted glass door closed-to behind her. Filling the basin with cool water, she pressed her palms against the smooth curved surface of the basin's bottom, watching how the water pressed down on her fingertips to turn their tips white- something that had always fascinated her since she was- no that wasn't right- since \*when\*? She didn't know anymoreâ€¦ Had such a thing fascinated \*Deborah\*, the strange, other woman who had once owned this body?

Still a little sleep-muddled and unsure as to her feelings on what she and Lennier had done earlier, Marianne found herself able to remember more and more about this mysterious 'Deborah'. She could remember the feeling of summer rain falling heavily on her upturned face as she spun herself around and around in a gentle breeze; The voices of people she was sure she had never met before; A small bedroom that never felt safe, even when it's door was locked; A pain completely unlike anything she'd ever known before; A heavy weight on her back and a firm grip at her wrist and anklesâ€¦ It seemed that her reluctance to know more was not enough to stop \*Deborah\* knocking on the inside of her mind, wanting to be let outâ€¦

"Marianne?" Coming sharply back to herself, Marianne stared into her reflection and noticed for the first time that a second face was now peering over her shoulder.

"How long have you been standing there?" Forcing her voice to sound neutral she let her gaze return to her hands in the sink.

"Not long." He was dressed now in loose fitting pants although his torso remained bare- curious- she'd always thought he would be even more 'modest' than sheâ€¦ "Are you unwell?" He moved a little closer, his usual concern for her made obvious by the frown that overtook his placid features, the way he tilted his head slightly.

"No, no I'm fine." Suddenly nervous, embarrassed even, Marianne



pulled herself free of the water and moved past him into the other room.

"But you are remembering more." It was a statement, not a question and Marianne no longer saw any point in denying it,

"Yes, I am. Don't worry Lennier," to prevent herself from having to meet his gaze, she busied herself with turning her discarded clothing right way out and tugging it over her head, arms and legs. "You'll have 'Deborah' back in no time at all"

"Marianne" Is that what you think I want?" He seemed rooted to the spot and forcing herself to look at him, Marianne realised that it wasn't,

"No, no of course not" Sinking to the surface of a nearby chair, she bowed her head, staring unseeing at the cardigan in her hands. "I'm sorry, that was a terrible thing to accuse you of" I didn't mean to be so cruel."

"It's of no matter." When she looked up once more, Lennier was kneeling practically at her feet. "Marianne, what now?" his voice was little more than a whisper and he stared up into her eyes with such seriousness that she found herself gulping back a laugh.

"I have no idea" Lennier, what we did earlier" I don't think it's something 'Deborah' could be capable of" If I decide that I want a future \*away\* from her" I might have to undergo more treatment" I might have to become someone else" Whatever happens I'm pretty much powerless until I get back to Earth" Lennier, if need be, can you just be my \*friend\*?"

"Of course. In truth I never \*stopped\* being your \*friend\*."

"Thanks."

^^^

"How long?" His voice flat, Franklin slumped over his desk, hands over his eyes in what looked to be some vain attempt at shutting out the world around him.

"About thirty-six hours." All cried out, Lillian moved to lean on the edge of her colleague's desk, her arms folded tightly around her middle. "We need to start testing all the non-Lumati" Still hidden in his large palms, Stephen nodded,

"Yeah" Get everyone on the link- emergency meeting." Finally emerging, he rubbed at his eyes with his fingers. "Sooner we get this out of the way"

"I know" We should keep this as quiet as possible, last thing we need is a riot on our hands"

"Why the \*hell\* not?" Suddenly angry, Franklin got to his feet, shoving his chair aside and starting to pace the small office. Knowing her colleague's need to vent some of his upset, Lillian smoothly reached out to push the door that led into the ward quietly shut. "I mean, my \*god\*! \*Our\* government wants us to just up and

leave, just pack up and go- leave all these people behind? How can they \*seriously\* expect us to do that? Y'know, I always think, when I get sent on these 'errands of mercy' that that's exactly what they are- \*mercy\*- us going to the aid of those who need itâ€¦ But \*no\*- it's just a damned \*exercise\* in PR! \*Votewinning\*! Nothing more and nothing less! How the \*hell\* can I be so \*naïve\*! Noâ€¦ Y'know what? I'm not going to play ball this timeâ€¦ They want me to leave this planet, leave my \*patients\* they're gonna have a \*helluva\* fight on their hands!"

"Stephen-"

"No Lillian, I mean it! They can all just go to hell!" He finished his rant, stood square in the centre of the tiny space, hands on hips, back to the door. The sound of slow, forceful clapping made him turn around to see almost his entire staff standing on the other side of the now open office door. Most were open-mouthed, but one- Grare clapped his hands furiously.

^^^

Showered and dressed, Marianne arrived in the silent hospice, her sneakers squeaking on the glassy, tiled floor. She'd left Lennier in his quarters, needing to return to work, hoping that in doing so she would remain herself, remain \*Marianne\* instead of accidentally slipping back into Deborah's strangely familiar guise.

When she arrived on the ward she found the place almost devoid of staff, the medics all crammed into the tiny office at the ward's far end. Those that could not fit spilled out into part of the ward, jostling for space as they passed urgent whispers amongst themselves. The first staff-member she reached, she pulled to one side,

"What's going on?"

"You've not yet heard?" The Narn female stared down at her in amazement, "An emergency evacuation has been ordered for all uninfected non-Lumati. The biohazard teams will arrive in less than thirty hoursâ€¦ We're all being re-tested."

"What?" Now it was Marianne's turn to look incredulous, "Where's Dr Franklin?" Hurrying past the remainder of her colleagues, Marianne moved in the direction in which the Narn had pointed.

"Stephen, what is going on?" The appearance of his protégé hovering in the office doorway prompted Franklin to discard the syringe in his hand, leaving it with another medic and move to place reassuring hands on her arms,

"We got a callâ€¦ We've been recalled."

"Recalled? That's impossible! What about our patients?"

"Exactly. Most of us have decided to stay, put up a fightâ€¦ We're re-testing ourselves but keeping the results to ourselvesâ€¦ Marianne, I can't think of a way out of thisâ€¦"

"Why are they \*doing\* this?"

"I don't knowâ€¦ Lillian and I are pulling out all the stops trying

to come up with \*some\* sort of effective treatmentâ€¦ If we can \*prove\* that we can make \*some\* impact on the virus we \*might\* stand a chance of getting more fundingâ€¦"

"They're going to force us to leave thoughâ€¦ If we leave what are the chances of us getting back?"

"I don't knowâ€¦"

"What if some of us say we're infected, stay here with as much equipment as possible, the rest of you could go back and work on a cure at that endâ€¦"

"I knowâ€¦ That's what I'm already suggestingâ€¦ I plan to stay so do Grare and Lillianâ€¦ Some of the others are still deciding."

"Jesusâ€¦" The enormity of their problem suddenly becoming clear, Marianne feed herself from her friend's embrace and backed away further into the room.

"Heyâ€¦ Marianneâ€¦ I know this is the last thing you needâ€¦ How are you feeling anyway? Did you get some more rest?"

"Rest?" Still in shock, Marianne puffed her cheeks and turned to stare at the multitude of charts that hung from one wall. "Not exactlyâ€¦ Stephen what do you know about me? From before my 'accident', anyway?"

"Not a lotâ€¦ No more than youâ€¦ There wasn't much in your fileâ€¦ Why?"

"There was no accident Stephenâ€¦ All that stuff in my file- names of my family- they don't existâ€¦"

"Marianne, what are you talking about?" His voice lowered to a hiss in an effort at preventing their conversation being overheard by those around them, Stephen edged closer, hands on hips and stooped a little to her height.

"Death of personality, Stephen. I'm Marianne Charlton now but I didn't used to beâ€¦ I used to be called someone called Deborahâ€¦. She- I killed someoneâ€¦"

"Marianne, where on \*earth\* did you get a \*crazy\* idea like that?"

"I'm starting to remember things- that's what all the flashbacks and dreams have been aboutâ€¦ And then there's Lennierâ€¦ He \*knew\* herâ€¦"

"Marianne, look I- "

"It's okay- you weren't to knowâ€¦ Look, lets deal with this later. Our first priority is our patientsâ€¦ I just wanted you to know- in case I lose control like I did in the monasteryâ€¦"

"Okayâ€¦"

"Then lets get on with itâ€¦ Any ideas?"

^^^

Twelve hours later, Marianne finished her rounds and slumped into her chair to survey the multitude of changes Franklin and some of the other medics had exacted in preparation for the arrival of the biohazard team. All entrances to the hospice had been barricaded and sealed as effectively as possible given the medics' lack of resources. Back-up generators were charged in readiness for any loss of power during the stand-off. Aside from that, rounds and patient care continued as normal. For as long as they were able, the whole team would remain barricaded in the temple, protecting their patients in the hope that during the delay, Franklin and the rest of the research team would find \*something\* to barter with. If \*that\* didn't work then the research team would surrender and leave with the biohazard squad to lobby Earth.Gov and continue to support the Lumati. Several of the medics had already volunteered to lie about their test results in order that they might stay

"This is madness" Whispering more to herself than anyone else- the office was empty since most of the other were sleeping in between shifts, Marianne rubbed furiously at her face in an attempt at slowing her fatigue.

"You, also require sleep." Starting slightly at the sudden interruption, Marianne blinked up at the Minbari who now stood a few feet away, his hands held loosely before him.

"You \*keep\* doing that- appearing when I least expect it" Recovering from her surprise, she sat back in her chair and swung around in it to half face him.

"I apologise- it was not my intention to startle you." Lennier moved to fetch a second chair.

"You're going to stay, aren't you." It wasn't a question; it didn't need to be.

"Yes, I am"

"Been tested yet?"

"No, I-"

"Didn't think so- you always seem to manage to be the last in line" It's really only a formality" Silently he rolled up one sleeve of his tunic and waited patiently for Marianne to prepare a needle and syringe.

"Your 'flashbacks'-" Oddly interested in the actions of the woman, Lennier followed her every movement with his eyes. She shook her head in answer before sighing and adding an insincere 'not really'.

"I'm fine- really!"

"When you arrive back on Earth, you will undergo treatment to stop them though?"

"Another memory wipe" Probably not a good idea" Probably wouldn't be permanent anyway- this one wasn't" Besides, I \*like\* who I am- I

\*like\* being \*me\*â€| Whoever that might be. Of course I might not have a choiceâ€| Either wayâ€| "

"Could your government \*force\* you to undertake another wipe?"

"If it means a violent and dangerous killer stays dead and buried, of course they canâ€| And why \*shouldn't\* they?"

"Deborah was neither 'violent' nor 'dangerous'."

"But she \*was\* a killerâ€| "

"Yes."

"Well then." A slightly frosty silence descended on the pair and Marianne continued to concentrate on making up a slide, which she placed carefully under her microscope. "Anyway, if I don't undergo another wipe then this 'Deborah' will come back- either way it's a change I don't want, a change I'm not ready forâ€| Lennier? I think you might want to look at thisâ€| "

"Very wellâ€| But Marianne, I know nothing of these thingsâ€| "

"You'll understand \*this\*" Lennier noticed that Marianne's expression had tightened and that she stepped away stiffly in the darkness of the poorly lit room, her palms pressed together to almost cover her mouth. Before he had any real chance to view, nor understand the microscope slide, Marianne's voice reached him in a stunned whisper, "It's positive."

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PART ELEVEN

\_\*\*

"You're not making any sense." Arms folded over her chest in a show of finality, Lillian stared back at her colleague and friend, defiance hardening her face, sharpening her features.

"Lillianâ€| " Sighing, Franklin stepped back, retreating to lean on his desk. "I can't just \*leave\*." The two friends had been arguing for some time now as to who was to leave the Lumati homeworld and who was to stay behind. "These are my \*patients\*-"

"And mine too! That's not the point I'm making. What-"

"Of course it is! And yes I know that they've been your patients for longer but-"

"Stephen-"

"I didn't think this was going to turn into an argument about who's been here the longest!"

"If you'd just let me get a word in! As I was \*trying\* to say, you're the one with the research experience- this is your \*thing\*! But you

need equipment- facilities- \*staff\*! And what if you develop the virus?"

"What if \*anyone\* does! Lillian this is \*not\* about staying behind because I've nothing to contribute! That's not why \*anyone\* is going to stay behind! None of these people are \*expendable\*- no life is-"

"That's not what I'm saying Stephenâ€|" Exasperated, she paused, expecting, \*daring\* him to interrupt her again and when he didn't she raised one surprised eyebrow before continuing. "What I'm saying is that you're quite possibly the only person who can find a cure for this diseaseâ€| If these people are going to survive this- if we're going to \*save\* them then you have to be able to work. You need equipment and facilities and \*staff\* that aren't permanently exhausted! Leaving isn't taking the easy way out, it's doing the \*best\* you \*can\* for them." Her point made, she let her voice and her countenance soften, "Stephen- the Lumati \*need\* youâ€| They \*need\* your research and your intuition and your wild ideas and your dedicationâ€| And most of all, when you get back to Earth they're going to need you up against EarthGov fighting their cornerâ€| You know I'm rightâ€|" The man's downturned eyes and the tight line of his lips told her that she had won.

^^^

"What now?" All events up until this moment were forgotten as Marianne slumped onto the low bench that ran an intermittent perimeter of the temple's exterior. Her hands were pressed palm down against her knees as if to hold her torso upright and her back straight. Still numb with shock, she stared unseeing at a spot a meter or so from her feet, unable to meet the steady gaze of the Minbari who moved fluidly to sit beside her.

"Nowâ€|" Realising that she wouldn't meet his eye, Lennier turned his face to stare at roughly the same spot that so fascinated Marianne. "\*Now\* is little different from \*then\*. I am unlikely to develop any serious or debilitating symptoms for some time- perhaps not ever since Minbari physiology is generally moreâ€| \*robust\* than that of many other speciesâ€|. I will remain in service to the Lumati people."

"I seeâ€| And you don't think it might be an idea to seek treatment? Leave when the evacuation team gets here?" Marianne was fighting to keep her voice calm but she could feel her tone rising.

"Marianne, there \*is\* no cure."

"\*Yet\*. There's no cure \*yet\*."

"Nevertheless-"

"What about me?" A suddenly tiny voice spoke up in Marianne's mind and before she could stop it, leapt from her mouth as well. Clearing her throat so that her normal speaking voice could return, she repeated her question, "What about \*me\*?"

Lennier paused, froze even, suddenly without a clue as to how to answer her. Taking a deep breath he formed the most obvious answer, "You will return with the evacuation team- of course."

"Of courseâ€¦ Of courseâ€¦. Lennier, how dare you." And with that, she rose to her feet, retreated back into the hospice and the company of others.

Confused, Lennier remained for a few moments where he sat. Then, he too turned toward the temple, returning to advise Dr Franklin of his condition- or so he told himself.

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T-minus twenty-three hours. Pausing to stare for a moment around the tiny and now almost empty office, Lillian hoped for about the hundredth time that this would work. The list of volunteers to stay behind was growing fast- Dr. Franklin would only take a few members of staff with him back to Earth. They had still to find out what Marianne's plans were but it was obvious to them all that Stephen wanted her to return with him and Lillian found she was inclined to agree. The recent resurfacing of the P.A's memories made that all the more important now- she needed treatment herself.

"How's it going?" Dumping an overflowing archive box on the chair nearest the open doorway, Stephen stepped into the cramped space.

"Okay, I thinkâ€¦ That's the 'staying' pile," she gestured over her shoulder at a small stack of charts and crates of bottles, bandages and other assorted equipment. "The 'going' pile is that heap of stuff just outside the doorâ€¦. Where's Marianne?"

"Rounds. She's been a little distantâ€¦ Something's upâ€¦."

"You should go and talk to her. She's going back with you- isn't she?"

"Yes. She might not know it yetâ€¦"

"She's not a child Stephen, you should check with her first."

"Yeah, I knowâ€¦ I'll go now." The man turned to leave,

"Stephenâ€¦ Did you hear about Lennierâ€¦?"

"Yeahâ€¦ I didâ€¦ He won't be able to leave nowâ€¦"

"I don't think he was planning to anywayâ€¦"

^^^^

This room was shrinking.

Lying flat out on her bed, her hands folded childishly over her chest, Marianne stared around her. She didn't know how long she'd been lying there, barely remembered her journey back from the hospiceâ€¦

Exhaustion, Grare had proclaimed, taking her arm and gently pulling her from the ward to lean by a laundry trolley, her face waxlike and her eyes vague.

Exhaustion, he'd diagnosed and she'd not bothered to argueâ€| No use telling him the truth, that every surgical instrument appeared to be covered with blood; that every human male she came into contact with now looked like Mitch or Simon, Gregory or David; that like some modern-day Lady MacBeth she couldn't seem to wipe the blood from her own hands nor where it smeared her faceâ€| No use worrying himâ€|

He'd left her here a short while ago. Fussed around making a relaxing herbal tea for her to sip and closing the strange blinds that covered the windows on this world, then left, gently pushed out by her. Now alone, Marianne wondered for a moment whether she should have let him stayâ€| His worrying and flustering, while irritating had at least kept her demons at bayâ€|

She knew it all now, a few details missing but now she knew the names, the faces, the deedsâ€| Knew who Deborah Tully was, saw her reflection in the mirrorâ€| She hadn't \*become\* her yet and Marianne hoped that she would retain her own personality since it felt that she were harbouring the memories of someone else inside her mind: these weren't her memories, those weren't her actionsâ€|

In a sudden, decisive move, she swung her legs around to stand and walk to the comm screen that dominated one wall, one hand blindly reaching out to tap instructions into the control panel. These were guestrooms, thankfully and things such as the computer were designed for use in Interlac rather than the Lumati's own language. Fiddling her way through file after file she eventually located an Earth-based newspaper in the database- These Lumati seemed to like the Humans, admired their lack of regard for those around them, related to itâ€|

Searching under various titles and subjects she eventually reached Tully, D and began to read.

^^^

T- minus fourteen hours.

Lennier opened his eyes to scowl, at the room around him, at his own inability to focus. He could feel the virus coursing through his veins, forcing its way into his respiratory and digestive systemsâ€| Or perhaps his imagination was running away with himâ€| Rising a little shakily, he rolled up his prayer mat and tucked it back into his footlocker.

Hisâ€| 'discussion' with Marianne had left him unsettled, her reactionâ€|he was still unsure as to how to process \*that\*â€|

Checking the time, he prepared himself to return to the hospice, to continue his work as if he were not, now one of the 'victims' of the plague.

^^^

When Dr Franklin found Marianne, after hearing several disturbing reports of her exhausted collapse on the ward, she was facing the computer terminal in her quarters, one hand propping up a tired chin and the index finger of the other pressed firmly onto the screen's



down cursor.

"Just \*what\* do you think you're doing?" Although he managed to keep his voice relatively light, she still detected the concern it held.

"I'm okay Stephen-" As she turned in her chair to face him her eye caught the bag in his hand and sighed at it's meaning, "I've not got the virus."

"Then what is it?" He perched himself on the desk by the computer and stared down at her; "If it were the 'exhaustion' Grare talked about then you'd still be asleepâ€|"

"It's nothing like thatâ€|" Sitting back in her chair she gestured vaguely at the screen in front of her and when the man shifted to read it more closely she vacated her chair to pace around the room nervously. When he'd finished reading and turned to look at her she shrugged and said simply:

"Deborah Tully, pleased to meet you."

"I remember this case- vaguelyâ€| There are so many murders that when you're so far away you give up paying attentionâ€| Do you remember what happened?" She nodded dumbly and he got up to lead her over to the small couch in one corner of the room, press her into it and sit beside her.

"I keep having flashbacksâ€| Seeing things that aren't really there, things I've seen beforeâ€|" At his encouragement she rested her head on his shoulder and he wrapped his arms securely around her.

"It doesn't have to stay this way. When we get back to Earth we can find a way to stop thisâ€|"

"I'd have to undergo another mind-wipeâ€| It'd be as temporary as this oneâ€| I'd have to become someone elseâ€|"

"Not necessarilyâ€|"

"I don't knowâ€|" Sitting up again, she wiped her damp eyes on her sleeve. "Did you hear about Lennier?"

"Yeahâ€|"

"He wanted to stay anywayâ€|" she shrugged

"Marianne, what \*is\* going on between you and him?"

"She and he were closeâ€| Would have been lovers if she'd not been under almost constant armed guardâ€|" Another shrug

"And what about you?"

"I don't knowâ€| I think Deborah and I share the same feelings for himâ€| I don't know if he can separate me from her thoughâ€| If I stay, maybe I'll become Deborah and his feelings for me- or lack of them won't matterâ€|"

"Marianne-"

"I know. I'm selling myself shortâ€¦ I can't help itâ€¦"

"Marianne, I need you to come back with me. Lillian's staying and I'm gonna need your expertiseâ€¦ I promise that if EarthGov insists on your undergoing the mindwipe I'll fight them every step of the wayâ€¦ To be honest I think a partial wipe would be enough to stop the flashbacks, suppress 'Deborah' and live a normal life as \*yourself\*."

"And if it's not?"

^^^

T-minus three hours.

The hospice was chaotic, Grare's luggage was packed and he was now busy running around the wards, trying to be helpful.

"Grare!" Lillian's voice sounded from behind him and he turned to find her standing in the doorway of the office, a fearsome look on her face. Her expression still stern, she stepped back, motioning him to join her and when he did so she closed the door firmly behind them.

As he sank into the cold confines of the plastic chair before her desk, he felt rather like a small child about to be disciplined by one of his elders. As such, he bowed his head and tried to look as meek as possible.

"Grare- Oh for goodness sake, stop looking so terrified, I want to talk to you, not \*spank\* you!" Falling into her own chair, it suddenly occurred to her that she didn't know his race nearly as well as she might, and that he might actually \*enjoy\* thatâ€¦ She found that she had to bite her lip to keep from bursting out laughing. "I'm worried about you. Are you okay? You're leaving, I take itâ€¦"

"Yes. Yes, yes- I intend to." The Brakiri nodded frantically, "My only concern is Lennierâ€¦ I feel that he planned to stay from the outsetâ€¦"  
> "Andâ€¦?"<p>

"Andâ€¦ I feel that perhaps his becoming infected gives him a rather convenient excuse to stay-"

"Grare, whether people stay or leave is up to themâ€¦"

"Yes, butâ€¦ Doctorâ€¦ what I am about to say should not leave this office-" At her nod and impatient gesture to continue, he sighed dramatically. "I do not think that Lennier \*trusts\* himself to stay, to do what he considers the right and honourable thingâ€¦ I think that \*if\* he has infected himself, or allowed himself to become infected then it is part of some misguided notion that he won't have the strength to stay of his own volition."

"I understand. But what about \*you\* Grare? You've been running about like a mad thingâ€¦ To be frank, it's not helping mattersâ€¦ I need my staff to be calm enough to make clear decisions, first to save lives and then later, whether to stay or leaveâ€¦ Please try to stay calm, it'd help the others to do the same."

"Of course doctor. I'll try to do better in future." His head still bowed, the man got to his feet and all but scuttled out of the office. Groaning to herself in defeat, for now she had offended him, Lillian slumped back into her chair and closed her eyes against the raging headache of earlier that she had been sure had gone awayâ€|

The slam of the office door brought her out of her reverie and she found herself staring into Stephen Franklin's worried face.

"You okay?" In a flash he had rounded the desk and had grabbed her chin to peer into her weary eyes with a flashlight.

"I'm fine! Just get that thing out of my face, will you!" Forcing her way past him she stalked around the room, one hand tugging loose strands of hair out of her way, tucking it behind her eyes.

"Lillian, what's wrong?"

"Wha? Oh, it's nothing, I just upset Grareâ€|"

"Brakiri can be sensitive," the man shrugged then added as an afterthought, "you didn't accuse him of being hysterical did you?"

"Not \*exactly\*â€| Why?"

"Brakiri are \*particularly\* sensitive over that oneâ€|"

"Greatâ€| So what's going on with you?"

"Not muchâ€| Marianne carried on trying to talk me into going back to Earthâ€|"

"And?"

"Andâ€| I've \*provisionally\* agreedâ€|."

"Thank god for that! What was the \*proviso\*?"

"That she comes with me. She can receive whatever treatment she needs and I'll need her assistance if you're still insisting on stayingâ€|"

"I am."

"Yeahâ€|"

^^^

## PART TWELVE

T minus two hours.

The ward was still when Lennier dropped his kit bag on the black glass floor and stopped to stare around him. Behind him, the door stood ajar, ready for any stragglers wanting to stay and anyone who changed their minds and wanted to leave. In one hour it would be

closed, locked and bolted to keep the biohazard teams outâ€¦ And those who chose to stay, in.

The office, a few feet away had been cleared of data-chips and most non-essential equipment to make room for food, bedding and pain-killing drugs. The 'stayers' would most likely only need to remain cocooned inside this temple for twelve hours or so- it was doubtful that the biohazard team would make much of a fuss over a gaggle of aliensâ€¦ Doctor Hobbs, they might make more of a concerted effort with but Lennier was confident that Franklin could convince them that those staff members locked in the hospice were highly contagiousâ€¦ And who knew, after two hours locked in the stifling temple with so many infected Lumati, chances were that they \*would\* be contaminatedâ€¦

Taking deep breaths, Lennier forced himself to focus on the mere 'details' of his part in this tragedy: the emptying of bedpans; the administering of medication; the lifting of dead bodies into bodybags and then into the chapel at the other end of the temple that now served as a temporary mortuaryâ€¦

If he could fill his mind with such trivia, then maybe he could shut down the panic that seemed to grow by the second.

"No one else here yet?" Lillian's voice echoed in the still air as she stepped over the threshold to stand beside him.

"No. Only those still on duty. I am sure that everyone will be here soon however." To Lillian, the minbari sounded cold, detached even, not at all like someone \*forced\* to stay here because he was infected by the virusâ€¦ She knew that if she had had the choice taken from her, she would not be this calm. When she vocalised these thoughts, Lennier merely shrugged, "That the choice is no longer mine to make is oddly calmingâ€¦ I cannot be held accountable for making a wrong decisionâ€¦" He trailed off, perhaps realising that this was probably not the sort of response others expected of a good and devout minbariâ€¦ Not that he considered himself to be either \*good\* or \*devout\*â€¦ Hadn't sinceâ€¦ Best to leave \*that\* thought well aloneâ€¦

"How many do you think will stay?" More to end the sudden and oppressive silence that fell between them, Lillian asked.

"It is impossible to tellâ€¦ I am the only one I am certain ofâ€¦"

"And me." That earned her an almost quizzical stare and she decided to change the subject, "The water urn's still switched on, I suppose?"

"Of course." The large, antiquated tea urn had remained full of water and switched on ever since Dr Hobbs had brought it into the temple all that time ago when they had first arrived on the Lumati homeworld. Smiling, nonetheless at her no doubt rhetorical question, Lennier followed her into the office to hunt down tea bags and vaguely clean cups.

Moments later, the two were back on the ward, leaning side by side against the triage desk, sipping at too-hot tea and staring unseeing at their surroundings.

"Marianne is returning?" Lennier's voice was kept nonchalant as he cradled his cup in both hands and fixed his gaze on the furthest empty bed from where they stood. Lillian nodded, lifting her own cup with both hands and blowing some of the steam from it.

"Stephen talked her into itâ€|"

"I am glad."

"\*She's\* not! What did you \*say\* to her?"

"Nothing of any consequence. I only wished to make obvious to her the importance of her leavingâ€| of \*surviving\*"

"What if she \*doesn't survive\*? What if, when she gets back to Earth they decide to make her undergo another mindwipe? What if she has to \*stop\* being \*Marianne\*? I guess you won't be around to see it so it won't matterâ€|!" The woman's voice rose slightly before she managed to rein her temper back in and stifled it by taking a slug of tea that scalded her mouth, making her wince in pain. A frown crossed Lennier's features as he moved to face her, leaving his own cup on the table at her side.

"Doctor, would I be right in thinking that you wish for Marianne to stay?"

"\*No\*! What I'm saying is that maybe you \*might\* want to tidy up a few loose ends before you go to meet your death like the good little \*martyr\*! What I'm \*saying\* is that you might \*want\* to say \*goodbye\*!" In another fit of temper, Lillian slammed her own cup down on the table, spilling its contents over her hand and gasping aloud. With a typical lack of fuss, Lennier reached for a cloth from a nearby trolley and gently pulled the woman over to a cold water tap, holding the affected hand under the cold stream. Without looking at her he said quietly,

"I think that perhaps you are 'projecting'. Perhaps it is \*you\* who feels the need to say 'goodbye' to someone you care about. I will however, take your advice and attempt to speak with Marianneâ€| I \*do\* care for herâ€|"

"Stephen seems to think it's \*Deborah\* you're in love withâ€| Can't \*think\* where he might have gotten an idea like \*that\* from. Can you?"

"If that is so then it would appear that we each have a lot of 'tidying of loose ends'â€|"

Their conversation was suddenly brought to an end by the arrival of the remaining members of the medical team.

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"Two, three, four, five- is your hand up or down, Larry? Six, seven, eightâ€|!" The entire team was assembled in a gaggle at the bed-free end of the ward. Lillian had returned to her resting-place at the triage table as soon as Lennier had deemed her hand relatively undamaged and the rest of the team had ambled their way over to join her. Lennier had given up his place to a nurse barely awake after her

nightshift and now hovered on the outermost edge of the group.

Stephen gave up trying to count the alternately rising and lowering arms of his med team and rubbed at his forehead with his palm. "Okay guys, lets all take a couple more moments to decide for ourselvesâ€| This is an important decision and I don't want to hurry you but if those who decide to stay are going to be given a fighting chance at doing just that then we're all going to have to think fast so we can get this place shut up tightâ€| Just get back here in a half-hour if you're stayingâ€| " Groaning in frustration, the doctor stalked into the office, letting the door close to behind him. Taking their cue from him the group slowly disbanded and before she had the chance to get out of the way Marianne noticed Lennier hedging his way toward her.

"Lennier, I don't really want to talk to you just nowâ€|" Arms wrapped around her in a defensive gesture, Marianne shifted from her place on the corner of the triage desk and moved away. Lennier looked helplessly toward Lillian who paused midway to the office to turn and wave at him to follow the younger woman. Sighing in resignation he did as he was bid and followed Marianne.

When he eventually caught up with her, she was on her way back to her quarters, ostensibly to pack. Silently he fell into step with her, keeping pace when she sped up and then fell suddenly back in an effort to lose him. Finally tired of this game, she stopped suddenly, her arms still wrapped protectively about her,

"Okay, \*what\*!"

"I am sorry." With his hands loosely clasped before him, he looked rather like a contrite schoolboy and Marianne had to keep a strong rein on herself to keep from smiling.

"Look, there's nothing for you to apologise for. You don't want me here- thank you for being so frank!"

"Marianne, I think you have misunderstoodâ€| or perhaps I haveâ€| I have the virus- I have little choice but to stay. Those who \*do\* choose to stay risk infection and have I assume chosen to stay because they feel that to do so would be in the greatest interest of their patientsâ€| Dr Franklin is returning to Earth because he can do most good there; Dr Hobbs intends to stay because she feels that she is better utilised hereâ€| Why were \*you\* going to stay?" Marianne hesitated, sighed, let her shoulders sag,

"Come on, walk with meâ€| I've too much stuff for one person to carry back to the landing site anywayâ€|" She moved off and again, Lennier had little choice but to follow.

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"Here, pass me that bag- no that one, that's itâ€|" Concentrating hard on shoving her belongings into a bag in some semblance of order seemed to Marianne quite a clever way to avoid looking the minbari at her side in the eye.

"You have not yet answered my question," Gently lifting her hands from the bag Marianne was trying to close, Lennier pulled her over to

sit beside him. "Why do you wish to stay?"

"I should have thought \*that\* was obvious, Lennier." She sounded flat, glum even. At his silence, she stole a glance at him before continuing, "I don't want to go through the mind-wipe again."

"And is that the \*only\* reason?"

"No, of course not." Seeing the problem, obvious now, Lennier steeled himself against what he was about to say,

"There is little point in you remaining here- to die with meâ€¦ I do not \*want\* you hereâ€¦ I will soon become too ill to deal with the complications of having someone like \*Deborah\* here with meâ€¦ And I feel that I do not \*want\* you here."

"Liar." The word was spoken dispassionately as Marianne rose to resume her packing.

"Minbari do not lie-"

"Except to help another," she finished for him, reaching up to snag a poster from the wall- left behind by her flatmate. Daring him to disagree, she set about rolling the large sheet of paper into a more manageable cylinder which she fastened with the closest thing that came to hand- a hairband found in a pot beside the bed.

"Marianne, the evacuation teams will arrive soonâ€¦"

"And?"

"You \*should\* return to Earth."

"To do what? Die? That's what'll happen- they'll put me through that bloody machine again- do another mindwipeâ€¦ Or maybe they won't, maybe they'll decide that since the last one didn't last it'd be easier to \*kill me\*â€¦ And it's \*me\* they'll be killing, not Deborah! Deborah doesn't \*live\* here any more!" This last was shouted, Marianne's finger tapping the side of her head for emphasis. "I won't be much use \*then\* will I? I won't be able to use my \*expertise\* to find a cure- I'll either be \*dead\* or \*someone else\*!" Pivoting on her heel, Marianne retreated to the bathroom, kicking closed the door that had been propped open by an old shoe.

"Marianne-" Lennier rose to stand by the now closed door.

"I'm in the \*toilet\* Lennier!" In an effort to give herself some breathing space, she turned on one of the taps and then slumped onto the lid of the toilet, her face in her hands. In the main room, Lennier stepped back from the door; a part of him fooled by the trick with the tap, and the other half of him understanding her need for space. He was returning to his seat on the edge of the bed when he suddenly decided that the floor would be far more comfortable and sank to it, letting his cheek rest on the cold glass. He'd never known his own body weight to feel this heavyâ€¦ Never known his one lung to be so incapable of supplying enough oxygen to itâ€¦ Never realised how much effort was required for his heart to continue beating. Opening his mouth to call for help. He realised that he didn't have any breath to make any soundâ€¦

A million miles away, the sound of running water abated and the bathroom door opened.

"Lennier? Oh shit- Lennier! Open your eyesâ€¦ Can you hear me? Here, squeeze my handâ€¦" Her hand clamped in the prone male's fist, Marianne fumbled around on the bed for her medical scanner. Not finding it, she settled for her stethoscope. Lennier's heart rate was slowing, evening out from its previous gallop and taking his breathing with it. Sighing with relief, Marianne reached further across her bed to retrieve her bag, rummaging around inside it for a painkilling agent. Finding it she concentrated on filling a syringe with the correct amount. Moments later, her patient's eyes dragged themselves open and he managed to focus weakly on her. From where he lay, almost face down on the floor he had to strain to see her face so he gave up, settling instead on the sight of their intertwined fingers. Realising belatedly that his grip must be causing her some discomfort he willed his fingers to open, releasing her hand. He heard her murmur a 'thanks' as she moved to pinch his wrist gently, muttering to herself as she took his pulse. "This the first symptom you've experienced?" At his slow nod she sighed, "Well, that analgesic should take care of the pain for now but we've got to get back to the hospice." He shook his head now, his breathing laboured with the effort.

"They'll be here soonâ€¦ You should return so that you can take the shuttle outâ€¦ I will make my own way backâ€¦ Laterâ€¦"

"Rubbish. You'll just stay here and play the martyr- I know you, Lennier-" Anything else she might have said was drowned out by the sound of engines overhead. "Oh \*shit\*! It can't be time already!"

"If anything, they are \*late\*. You need to go now."

"Tough." The blinking of the comm screen above moved Marianne to get to her feet. Dr. Franklin's features filled the screen, his expressionâ€¦ 'concerned' at least.

"Marianne, what the hell are you \*doing\* there?" The biohazard team wants everyone onboard within ten minutes of their landing- they don't want to risk exposing themselvesâ€¦ You need to get back here right now or you'll be left behind-"

"I know Stephenâ€¦ There's been a change of planâ€¦ I'm staying."

"You're \*what\*? Look, we've not set up the barricades yetâ€¦ I'll come over thereâ€¦ convince the team that you're fit for evacuationâ€¦"

"No! Let them take you and don't mention meâ€¦ They don't know where I am and they're not going to waste time trying to track me down-"

> "They will if I make them-" <p>

From his place on the floor, Lennier heard her hang up and groaned to himself. Then he heard her moving furniture around, pulling a large chair over to the door in an effort to keep the biohazard team out.



"Marianne, what are you doing?"

"What does it look like!" The cabinet she was attempting to push across the door was proving too heavy and she turned her back to lean against it, using her entire body weight to move the thing into place.

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## PART THIRTEEN

This place needed cleaning. From his place, propped up against the bed, Lennier could see dust balls floating delicately across the floor of Marianne's flat. The first waves of breathless and exhausting pain had left him now with little more than a dull ache to serve as reminder. Still too weak to consider shifting his position, Lennier simply stared up through heavy eyes to where Marianne sat atop the low cabinet she was using to barricade the door. With her hands tucked under her thighs and her feet swinging to and fro a foot or so from the floor, she looked as childlike as Deborah had. The hard frown of determination that fixed her features was, however, solely Marianne's.

"What do you hope to accomplish, Marianne?" His voice didn't sound like his own and he coughed in an attempt at bringing forth a more recognisable sound.

"What do you mean?" Looking up suddenly, as if having forgotten he was there, she stared intently at his face, "Are you comfortable like that?" In a moment she was on her feet, fetching a pillow to place carefully behind his head; pouring water into a glass for him to sip and pressing her palm against his forehead.

"I am comfortable. You did not answer my question."

"\*You\* didn't answer \*mine\*" A small, teasing smile appeared then vanished just as quickly. Marianne turned and retreated to her station at the door. "I told you. I want to stay."

"Marianne, if you stay, you will never be able to return to your home. You may die here." He spoke quietly, patiently, as if, she thought, to a child.

"You think I don't \*know\* that!" She was pacing again, her hands held in tight fists at her sides. "Look Lennier. There doesn't seem much point in arguing about this. You \*obviously\* can't understand my point of view,"

"And you \*won't\* see \*mine\*." If she didn't know better, Marianne would have sworn that \*sounded\* like a retort. anger even. Before she could wonder any further, the sound of footsteps on the steps outside, interrupted,

"Marianne, open the damn door!" Stephen's voice sounded weary.

"Not a chance," was the only reply Marianne could think of. She was

stopped pulling another piece of furniture across the room by another voice, that of Lillian Hobbs,

"Marianne, it's okay. We're not going to force you into anything you don't wantâ€¦ I promise." For some reason she couldn't fathom, Marianne found herself dismantling her barricade and opening the door.

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Deadlock. For a change. Palms pressed flat against what served as a windowsill in Lumati buildings, Dr Franklin scowled at the dreary and barren view from Marianne's window. Stephen's young protégé had always been stubborn but he'd always found himself admiring her determination, seeing perhaps a glimpse of younger version of himself in her steely and grim expression. Right now thoughâ€¦ If Lillian Hobbs hadn't made him promise not to, he would have bundled Marianne up and carried her to the evacuation shuttle himselfâ€¦ Perhapsâ€¦ Had Lennier not been slumped against a pillow on the floor, his breathing shallow and his complexion pale, even for a Minbari. As it was, the moment the door opened and he'd caught sight of the former Ranger, Stephen had automatically switched from surrogate parent to doctor mode and swooped on the prone male, demanding questions and giving diagnoses before Marianne had a chance to launch into her ill-prepared speech about why she should stay.

If he turned his head to the side a little to take in the scene being played out in the room behind him, Stephen would see Lennier's prone form partly hidden from his sight by Marianne's kneeling figure; Lillian squatting opposite as she filled a syringe to administer it. If he had allowed his hearing to attend, he would just be able to catch the two women's murmured consultation, on even closer listening he would hear Lennier's whispered replies to Lillian's questions. Finally deciding to rejoin the play, Stephen turned to reiterate his suggestion that Marianne undergo a second test to ensure she hadn't also contracted the virus. It was this 'suggestion' that had led to Stephen's being banished to the window in the first place:

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The door had burst open and Stephen strode into the room. Lennier was obviously putting on something of a brave face but Dr Franklin knew this disease and understood Minbari psychology enough to know that the Ranger was suffering.

"When did this happen?" Trying to keep his voice level while questioning Marianne, Stephen focused on peering into Lennier's eyes, opening the Minbari's lips to glance into his throat, checking his pulse.

"He was like this when I came out of the bathroom about an hour ago.

I gave him an analgesic, which seems to be working but I want to get him back to the hospice."

"And?"

"He refuses." Marianne kept a slight distance, allowing Lillian to provide an impromptu shield between herself and the two men that stopped her from having to meet either one's gaze.

"Marianne, I need to get Lennier back to the hospice- get him wired upâ€¦ I have a few drug combinations we can tryâ€¦ We might be able to stave the evac. teams off if we can convince them we're close to finding a treatmentâ€¦"

"They've not started evacuating yet?"

"No. They're waiting in their shuttles for the okay from me- they don't want to expose themselves to the virus for any longer than necessaryâ€¦ I need you to come with me tooâ€¦ You've been in close contact with Lennier while he's contagious- if the disease has been mutating at the same rate we've been observing, it's probably more than capable of attacking the human nervous systemâ€¦"

"No." Stepping into Stephen's line of vision Marianne crossed her arms resolutely. "The moment I leave here you'll try to get me to go back with you."

"Marianne you're being ridiculous- we don't have time for this-"

Sensing an impasse fast approaching, Lillian decided to step in, herself, "Stephen, I'm sure if you gave your word that Marianne's wishes would be respected-" Stephen looked away. "Oh for pity's sake!" The furiously bubbling tension was only forgotten, momentarily when Lennier decided that breathing was becoming too painful and stopped for a few moments. When the three medics had succeeded in reviving him, Stephen stomped over to his place at the window, allowing the others to crowd around the patient.

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"Marianne, he's getting worse. He needs more than we can do for him here." Deliberately keeping her voice low so that Stephen wouldn't be able to overhear or interrupt, Lillian stared intently, first at Lennier then at Marianne.

"He needs more than we can do for him, full stop!" A moment's hesitation, "I trust you not to go back on your wordâ€¦ Lennier can't wait for Stephen and I to settle this- the patient comes first."

"Back to the hospice?"

"Yeahâ€¦"

"Let's get your toothbrush-" Pulling the younger woman gently to her feet, Lillian manoeuvred her into the bathroom, shutting the door to behind them. "Marianne, when we get back to the hospice and get Lennier stabilised, you and I are going to talk this through. If you can make me understand your reasons for staying, I'll sort things out with Stephen." At Marianne's mute nod, Lillian gave an answering one and led the way back into the other room.

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Why was the light in here so bright? Lennier stared up at the strip lighting directly over his bed and reflected for a moment that *that* might be the reason. After an uncomfortable but uneventful journey back to the hospice, he had found himself wired up to several monitors and miraculously, some of the pain had lessened. A short distance away, Marianne was reluctantly allowing Lillian to siphon off some of her blood in the name of re-screening before following the older woman to the office for a 'little chat'. Dr Franklin was hovering nearby, trying not to scowl and failing but managing not to interfere. Lennier let his eyes follow Marianne's retreating figure and allowed himself the small luxury of imagining that Marianne might stay, before hurriedly reminding himself that it would be better for *her* if she left- forced or not. His wishes should certainly *not* be listened to- not even by himself.

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"Marianne, you're not *telling* me anything! I can see you're scared but they're doing amazing things with memory reorganisation these days-

"Reorganisation? The previous inhabitant of this body- this *brain* was a *murderer*! *Reorganise that*! Lillian, I'm having flashbacks and they are *terrifying*! This *Deborah* person had a *horrible* life and I can't *share* that with her!"

"Marianne, you've seen what the Lumati have been through. What Palorr suffered, what Lennier is suffering- this is not a *gentle death*! It's slow and it's agonising! And it's *unnecessary*! Marianne, tell me the truth. Tell me what's really going on in that head of yours."

Marianne took a deep breath, "It's too late Lillian, I'm not Marianne anymore, not really. Deborah wants to live- possibly deserves to. I can't cope with these flashbacks-, which are only going to get worse. And it doesn't matter how many mind-wipes I undergo, how many different people I become, or even if they decide to keep 'Marianne', Deborah is always going to be there- her epilepsy- *my* epilepsy has made sure of that. I think she can cope with the memories- if she decides to keep me around then maybe she'll teach *me* how to cope. This is her chance to redeem herself-

"By finding she has the virus and by staying behind- taking \*your\* place! Please, it's the only way- help us!"

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Dr Hobbs looked a little shell-shocked, Lennier thought as he watched their progress from the office, back to his side. Marianne lookedâ€¦ triumphant? Apprehensive at the same timeâ€¦ She stood beside him and fiddled with the edge of the blanket that covered him, in a very un-Marianne-like way. Hobbs made her way towards Dr Franklin, head bowed, muttered a few words in his ear. The shell-shocked expression spread from Lillian's face to Stephen's. Confused, Lennier turned his head to search Marianne's face for some clue.

"It's decided," she whispered, "Not by \*me\* or you or \*them\*â€¦ The virus- it wants me to stay." A cryptic answer but Lennier instantly understood and found his own face mirroring those of the two doctors. Marianne shrugged and suddenly Lennier knew that this wasn't Marianne anymore- not completely.

Franklin had tears in his eyes as he pushed Lillian aside and went to notify the evacuation teams that the two of the them would be joining the rest of the medical teamâ€¦ but that his assistant, Marianne Charlton had contracted the virus and would have to stayâ€¦

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## EPILOGUE

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He had barely left his laboratory since arriving back on Earth. Silently, anxiously, \*feverishly\* working away at his desk, Dr Franklin had all but shunned company, assistance, sometimes even food.

Making as little noise as possible, Lillian hovered in the doorway and watched the man taking a rare and brief break from what was becoming his life's work, to rub at the bridge of his nose. As one of the 'shunned', Dr Hobbs hadn't approached her colleague since breaking the news of Marianne's infection to him.

Winning at the memory, Lillian recalled the expression on Stephen's face- a combination of hurt and betrayal. She hadn't told him that she and Marianne had doctored the results, she hadn't needed to- his scientist's mind would soon note the discrepancy. And he had, the moment the evacuation shuttle had left the Lumati homeworld with no hope of returning. He'd barely spoken to Lillian since then, refused to listen to her reasons, which may, Lillian mused, have been for the best since she wasn't entirely sure her rationale would stand up to his scrutiny any more than had her ability to fudge medical data.

If she was truthful, there \*was\* no logical, rational explanation for her actions. No one but she had seen Marianne's fear and desperation; no one else felt that were Marianne to return to Earth, the consequences would be even worse than staying behindâ€¦ Staying behind on an isolated and dying alien planet, surrounded by a dead and dying populace and with only a sick and no doubt dying Minbari former Ranger for companyâ€¦

She'd given up trying to apologise to Stephen and instead kept his contempt for her close to her heart as a kind of penance. It seemed that Stephen kept his anger for Lillian because to blame Marianne for her own actions would be too painful. Marianne was his star pupil, an almost surrogate daughter and if it were easier for Stephen to still see his former Physician's Assistant as a child, incapable of making her own decisions, instead of the strong-willed and decisive young woman she really was, then that was okay. If he had to blame- hate even, his friend, peer and colleague so that he wouldn't have to blame and hate his protégé then that was the way it would have to be. Lillian stood by her decision no matter what anyone else might have to say on the matter.

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The terrain was bleak beneath the grey sky, brightened by winter sun. A chill wind swept across the barren expanse to render the wasteland of the former homeworld of the Lumati; even less hospitable than it had been the last time she stared out through the one window in the Temple. Still, she thought she might venture outside today, just as she did whenever she had the chanceâ€¦ Although cold and depressing, at least there was fresh airâ€¦

In the silence of the temple Marianne listened closely to the measured sound of her own footsteps as they padded through the passageways that led to the only remaining ward.

Lennier still hung onto life; his own breaths laboured and shallow as he slept. But he was one of the lastâ€¦ Perhaps the physical strength of the Minbari helped him to fight the onslaught of the disease when his Lumati neighbours succumbed quickly. Perhaps it was the strength of the Anla'shok that kept him hanging onâ€¦ perhaps it was his own, personal bloody-mindednessâ€¦ Whatever it was, Marianne found she was grateful to him for still living...Resentful too, although she'd no idea why.

Do you want to die? That was a question she'd found herself asking several of her patients over the last monthâ€¦ Do you \*need\* to die? One by one, each had raised hopeful eyes to her faceâ€¦

It didn't take much, just a few milligrams more of the painkilling drugs she already administered.

It didn't take much, just a few deep, cleansing breaths, staring into the mirror in the office before filling the syringe.

It didn't take much, just the inability to look herself in the eye.

It didn't take much, just the inability to be honest with her only friend on the planet.

It didn't take muchâ€¦

Marianne's left hand blindly sought out the syringe tucked at the back of the desk drawer, filled with morphine and stoppered safeâ€¦ It was that syringe that kept her sane, she thought. When Lennier had raised his eyes to hers in that same hopeful, pitiable way, when he too barely nodded assent at her whispered question she would return to this drawer and this syringeâ€¦ There'd be enough for him and no doubt, for her tooâ€¦if it came to thatâ€¦

It hadn't, yet.

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### Lillian Hobbs' Personal Diary

Two years ago, almost to the day, I and a bunch of other characters-volunteers and drifters mainly, arrived on the home planet of a race called the Lumati. The Lumati were sick- all of them and We- like good and faithful Earth and Alliance Citizens trundled along to help save them.

Reinforcements arrived, in the form of my former colleague and old friend Dr. Stephen Franklinâ€¦ With him was his protégé, a physician's assistant named Marianne Charlton. Left amnesic by a shuttle accident that wiped out her entire family, Marianne's life was the hospital she awoke in and she was a blank slate upon which Stephen could create anew the ultimate medic: dedicated, analytical, brilliant and yet with a bedside manner that put anyone else to shame, she became, on that planet, the benchmark against which we all judged our own abilityâ€¦

Given time, I feel certain that she and Stephen would have discovered the cure to the Lumati malaiseâ€¦ \*saved the planet\*! And the rest of us amazed onlookers who had dabbled here and there and pressed needles to arms and wired organs to monitors would have looked upon them as heroesâ€¦ The propaganda machine at EarthGov would have had a field dayâ€¦

That's not how it ended upâ€¦

The med team was evacuated, the Lumati declared incurable. The entire star system that housed the Lumati homeworld was placed under strict quarantineâ€¦ Only those who tested positive for the virus were left behindâ€¦ Among them, a former member of the Anla'shok and one Marianne Charlton. Left to dieâ€¦ She, through choiceâ€¦

I, of course am back onboard Babylon 5, treating security personnel with PPG burns and lurkers with the fluâ€¦ Dr. Franklin is on Earth, researching alien biologyâ€¦ He's never really forgiven me for what I did to keep Marianne on the planet- nor should he, I effectively signed her death warrantâ€¦

I still stand by what I didâ€¦ Most daysâ€¦ A part of me almost

imagines that she's still alive out there- that she's come up with a cure that has saved the remaining Lumati and Lennierâ€¦ It's my own little fantasy, probably what helps me to sleep at nightâ€¦

That's all going to end nowâ€¦ Stephen's managed to gain authorisation to take a team back thereâ€¦ He's come up with a vaccine that'll keep them safe from the infectionâ€¦ I think he's looking for some sort of 'closure'â€¦ I'm not going- I turned it downâ€¦ I'm going to sit here, at my desk in medlab, waiting for confirmation of all my worst fearsâ€¦ Confirmation that it's all over, that the Lumati are utterly wiped out and that finally it's all overâ€¦

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End  
file.